SHORT STORIES

No. 783.] Week Ending January 2nd, 1904. [Price One Penny.

"She was to marry the one who reached her first!
Would it be the man she loved or the man she hated!"

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The purest and most efficient Remedy procurable for
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SHORT STORIES

No. 783.] Week Ending January 2nd, 1904. [One Penny.

A SPORT OF THE GODS.

The Strange Story of a Girl, her Two Lovers, and an Eccentric Will.

"It comes to this, Kendrick, that I will give you a thousand pounds if you promise to discontinue your love-making with Dolly Meredith."

The other leapt to his feet. In his eyes was a strange glitter, his right hand was clenched.

"The words could only have been uttered by an incorrigible cad," he cried. "Please remember, Martin Walbrook, that whatever your standard of honour may be, mine is unimpeachable. I do not care to discuss this matter any further, for your very offer tells me that you consider your suit with Miss Meredith likely to be doomed to failure."

A sneer played round Walbrook's lips. He rose, took up his hat, and said:

"The deductions of a briefless barrister are likely to be correct! Anyway, I have no fear. Though the affections of the lady upon whom you have set your heart may not be directed towards me, still, I think that I stand better with her father than do you, Mr. Rupert Kendrick. He is more likely to encourage the suit of Martin Walbrook, gentleman and well-to-do, than that of a barrister struggling hopelessly for fame. You have missed a very good chance of making a thou., and I wish you a very 'Good-day'!"

The door slammed behind him, and the other was left alone with his thoughts.

They were not very pleasant ones, it may be presumed. Here he was, young, handsome, clean-shaven, a veritable Apollo, fairly optimistic of his future in life, but with a present that was sickening.

Strive as he would, he could not convert the tide of briefs into his channel. His sole income consisted of two hundred pounds a year left him by his father, and he had fallen hopelessly in love.

Before he had met Dolly Meredith, life with him had been the reverse of serious. At his club everyone had deemed him a jolly good fellow. Athletically inclined, he had joined the Harriers. There he met Martin Walbrook, and an acquaintanceship had sprung up between them, though this had not ripened into anything very much deeper. Through him he had been introduced to Miss Meredith. He came, he saw, and was conquered.

For the course that he took he had every excuse.

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Dolly Meredith was a girl to whom any mortal man might have lost his heart. Tall, fair, with a face like an angel's, she combined her outward beauty with a heavenly grace. Sympathetic to a degree, she was the very opposite of the usual Society girl.

The only child of Maurice Meredith, successful City financier, whose wife had died when Dolly was but a child, she had been petted to a degree. Her smallest whim was satisfied, yet her nature was not spoilt. Between daughter and father there reigned a bond of the purest love, and she returned his little acts of kindness and thoughtfulness by obeying his every wish.

Lucky the man who won her for a wife!

There was but one flaw in the character of Mr. Meredith, her father. That flaw was a love of Mammon. Money was his idol, he could never make enough. If ever anyone suggested that it was time he should retire from business, his answer was a scowl. To all he made the same reply:

"It is for the sake of Dorothy!"

He could not see the beam in his eye; he could not see that the fortune he had amassed was twenty times as ample as the most ambitious girl could expect.

And so the glitter of Martin Walbrook's gold had attracted him. Whenever Walbrook had visited his house, he had always been the acme of studied politeness, and Mr. Meredith had always looked upon him as the ideal husband for his darling daughter.

But man proposes, the Fates dispose, and Cupid is an agent upon whom there is no reckoning.

As soon as Rupert Kendrick had been introduced to Miss Meredith, his visits to "The Berries" became more and more frequent. He could spare the time well enough—he only wished he could not.

Gradually Dolly Meredith became entangled in Love's cunningly-spread net. Who could resist the charms, the little courtesies that showed debonair Rupert Kendrick to be an inborn gentleman?

She realised this fact and tried to resist it. She had good reason for doing so. Her father, she knew, had set his heart on her marrying Walbrook, and her training forbade her going against her parent's wishes. And yet—she loved another! What should she do—what could she do?

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Martin Walbrook fully understood the state of affairs. He hated the day he had ever met Kendrick; he blamed himself for ever introducing a possible rival.

He loved Dolly with all the love of which he was capable. Her father's thousands, possibly millions, afforded a fitting background to her own accomplishments.

And he was being cut out by a well-nigh penniless barrister. Ah! there was the key to the difficulty. He would buy Rupert's love. The bait of a thousand pounds dangled before his rival's eyes would be sure to be effective. A thousand to him was little—especially if with it he could buy Meredith's inheritance.

He called on Kendrick at his chambers, made the offer, and obtained the answer you have read at the beginning of this story.

When Walbrook had left, a strange, restless feeling came over the young barrister. He tried to study, but failed miserably. His thoughts were such a curious jumble of Dolly, money, Walbrook, law, and love that he could not work.

A sense of uneasiness prevailed in him; something that he could not understand kept whispering: "Go and propose to Dolly; now or never. He who hesitates is lost."

"Confound it all, I *will*," he cried; then added gloomily: "May as well get knocked out of the running as soon as possible, I suppose."

The Merediths lived in Holland Park. In none too happy a frame of mind, Kendrick walked briskly up Chancery Lane on this sharp, cold, January afternoon and then took the Tube to the neighbourhood of his destination.

When he arrived at "The Berries" he rang the bell and inquired of the servant who answered it if Miss Meredith were at home.

"She is, sir," the domestic replied, "but she is engaged."

"Engaged?" echoed Rupert. "May I ask with whom?"

"Oh, yes, sir. It's only Mr. Martin Walbrook."

Only Mr. Martin Walbrook! Ye gods, *only* Mr. Martin Walbrook! Kendrick had to decide swiftly what to do. Should he go boldly in and interrupt their *tête-à-tête*, taking the bull by the horns, or should he await a more favourable opportunity to see his beloved one?

He decided on the former course.

"Will you please take this card in to Miss Meredith and ask her if I may see her?" said he to the servant.

In a few minutes the maid returned with the message that her mistress would be delighted to see him.

He was ushered into the drawing-room.

With a sweet smile Dolly rose to greet him.

"How do you do, Mr. Kendrick?" she exclaimed. "I am so pleased to see you. Mr. Walbrook and I were just talking about you."

"Yes," put in Martin. "Speak of the—gentleman—and he appears. Whatever brings you here this time of day, Kendrick?"

Rupert did not reply. He was thinking—thinking hard. Why was that radiant look on Dolly's face? Had Walbrook proposed—had he been accepted?

"Can she possibly love this—thing?" muttered Rupert between his teeth.

Suddenly he returned to his senses. His hostess was speaking to him.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"Really, Mr. Kendrick, you seem strangely preoccupied," pouted Dolly. "You've scarcely spoken to me yet. And, by the way, won't you sit down?"

Rupert mumbled an apology, and took the proffered seat.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed four.

"Mr. Walbrook was just saying 'Good-bye' when you came in. He says he has a most important engagement at half-past four," said Dolly.

"Really," hastily interposed Walbrook, "I do not think that it is quite so important after all. If you will allow me——"

"Oh, no! Mr. Walbrook, I cannot allow you to break your appointments for me. I am sure that your friend will excuse you."

Rupert could not suppress a triumphant smile at the discomfiture of his rival. Surely the Fates were propitious; the other could not get round this very broad hint for his departure.

He rose, not too graciously, and said:

"If that's the case, all well and good. Certainly, I should—that is, it would be inconvenient for me to miss my engagement. So, *au revoir* for the present, Miss Meredith." Then, with a quick glance at Rupert, he added, "I shall call in and see your father to-morrow. I trust that he will do as I wish."

Kendrick paled. *So he had proposed!*

The other held out his hand to him. With a slight gesture as if of accident, Rupert knocked over a small pile of papers that were on the table by his side. He stooped to pick them up, and, purposely fumbling in the action took some time in doing so. Meanwhile the maid had appeared to show Walbrook out, and so he had avoided shaking hands.

As soon as Walbrook had gone, Rupert spoke, practically for the first time.

"Am I to congratulate you?" he said.

Dolly's face was a study—it blanched and flushed alternately.

"Sir," she stammered, "your question is capable of only one meaning. It is rather impertinent, and I refuse to answer you."

Rupert noticed that in the girl's beautiful blue eyes there was something akin to tears and he made haste to apologise.

"I beg your pardon. As a matter of fact, I came here this afternoon to ask you a very important question. I feared that Walbrook had forestalled me.

"Miss Meredith, let us come to the point at once. Ever since I saw you, now nearly a year ago, I have been consumed with a burning, passionate love for you and——" He broke off suddenly, his voice betraying the eagerness of his words—"Dolly, I came to ask you if you'd be my wife."

For a few seconds there was silence—a silence that was purgatory to both. Kendrick gripped the arms of his chair ferociously, in his eyes was a look of convincing appeal.

At last she spoke falteringly:

"Mr. Meredith-Rupert. I—you must not be disappointed. I thank you for the honour you have done me, but——" She stopped.

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"But," he cried, "say, he *did* propose?"

"Yes, he did. And——"

"You accepted him?"

"No!" she cried, "because I do not love him. Rupert, do you not see, *can* you not see; the position I am placed in? Martin proposed and I could not refuse! Could not, because of my father's wishes; but I did not accept him, because I loved—*you!* I prevaricated, I——"

But Rupert had sprung up and had caught her in his arms, and was raining kisses on her upturned, unresisting face. When he released her, she continued:

"I refused to give a decision and referred him to my father."

"Dolly, Dolly, won't you marry me? I know I am not rich, but I can work, work like a demon. Things will turn out all right. Dolly, give me your answer, now, do."

"I cannot decide!" she urged, almost startled. "I cannot decide!"

"Promise me then you will not marry Walbrook. Nobody can say that I am fond of telling tales out of school, but a little interview I had with him early this afternoon gave me an insight into his character. He visited me to offer me £1,000 to cease from seeing you again!"

Dolly Meredith jumped to her feet, her eyes blazing with anger. Her bosom heaved, and she was quivering with emotion.

"Did he stoop so low as that?" she asked. "Rupert, I can scarcely believe you. I have never liked the man. I have tolerated him solely for my father's sake, but I did not think he was quite such a scoundrel! How I hate him, how I loathe him, if that is true!"

"It is true, I am sorry to say it is true," said Rupert. "I did not intend to tell you yet, but in my anxiety the truth came out. Tell me—is your father prejudiced against me?"

He sat by her side on the couch and softly stole his arm round her waist.

"No," she said gently, "he likes you, I know he does. He admires you for your manliness, as I admire you. But he knows that you——"

"Poverty is no disgrace," interpolated Kendrick.

"You cannot convince father of that. Rupert, I love you dearly, as much as, nay, more than, I hate Martin. But I must abide by my father's decision; I will do anything he wishes."

Just then the maid brought in afternoon tea. Having had a cup, Rupert prepared to go.

"Do not go yet," said Dolly, "my father will be back from the City in a few minutes. Why not stay and ask him if—if he will consent to our engagement?"

"Darling," he replied, as once more he took her in his arms, "you are right. There is no time like the present."

The minutes that elapsed between then and the time when they heard the latch-key inserted in the front door was occupied in a manner of which only lovers know.

However, when Mr. Meredith entered the room, the sight he saw was nothing unusual. Like wise young people, they had discreetly separated. Mr. Meredith was a gentleman of some sixty years of age. He was forty when he fell in love with little Kitty MacMahon, and married her. He was forty-eight when the great grief of his life overtook him—the death of his wife.

Dolly went up to him, and, putting two soft hands round his neck, kissed him. An unwarrantable pang of jealousy smote Rupert. "Father," said Dolly, almost in a whisper, "Mr. Kendrick has something very, very important to say to you. I will run upstairs for a few minutes."

When she reached the door, she flashed a reassuring smile of hope to Rupert. Then she fled, and left him to his fate.

"Well, my boy," said the kindly tones of Mr. Meredith, "what is it you want?"

Kendrick replied, in a well-controlled voice:

"I have had the great fortune, sir, to win your daughter's love. I remained here this evening to ask your consent to our engagement. I trust that you see no material obstacles in the way, or have any personal object ion to me as a son-in-law?"

The elder man's face hardened. He did not speak for a few minutes. When he did, he said in grave, stern tones:

"Kendrick, I have expected this. You place me in an awkward position, for though I believe my daughter has an affectionate regard for you, yet I think she could make a better marriage. You are a shrewd enough man, Kendrick, to know that there is another Douglas in the field. Putting aside altogether the question of means—I do not for an instant believe that you are courting my daughter for her dowry—I owe Martin Walbrook a debt of gratitude. Seven years ago he assisted me financially when I was hard pressed. The great name of Meredith was in imminent danger of being dishonoured, on account of a great reversal I then sustained. Thanks to your rival, I came out of the fray successfully. Maurice Meredith, as they say in the City, is the man who never forgets. Do you follow me, Kendrick?" he added with a quick glance.

The other nodded. There was a despondent look on his face.

"Well," continued the old man, "the time has come when I can repay. I know Martin loves my daughter dearly. She may love you, but I firmly believe she would learn to love Martin. Yet I do not wish to have Dolly lose her happiness. I must have time to decide. In a week or two you will know whether I will sanction your engagement or not. Dolly will, in any case, I am certain, do as I wish. That is all. Good-night!"

Thus abruptly ending, Mr. Meredith escorted Rupert to the door. He was denied the pleasure of seeing Dolly again that night.

* * * * *

As Rupert was leaving his chambers the next evening he received a telegram.

This is what it said:

"*Come at once. Father dying.*—DOLLY."

"Heavens!" cried Rupert. "What can have happened?" Post-haste he hurried to "The Berries." When he reached there all the blinds were drawn. Mr. Meredith was dead!

He went in to console Dolly. Tearfully she told him what had happened.

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"In the morning my father felt unwell, so remained in bed. About noon he felt pains in the region of his heart. I sent for the doctor, and when he came his news was appalling.

"He can live but for a few hours," was the verdict.

"Father bore up strongly when he heard the statement.

"'Send for my solicitors,' were his first words.

"As quickly as possible Mr. Drudge, of Messrs. Giddy and Drudge, arrived.

"While he made his will he was alone with the solicitor.

"The last words he said to me were:

"'Dolly, promise—me—that—you—will—abide—by—the—dictates—of—my—will?'

"Of course I gave him my promise, and, as he died, he muttered: 'May the gods decide for the best.'

"What could he mean? What could he mean?"

Presently Martin Walbrook called and was unfeignedly shocked to learn of Mr. Meredith's death.

As soon as possible they both left together.

When outside, Martin sneered:

"I suppose you consider Mr. Meredith's death a stroke of luck for you, eh?"

"You insufferable cad!" was Rupert's only comment.

* * * * *

The day on which Mr. Meredith's sudden death took place was a Friday.

He was buried on the following Tuesday.

After the funeral, those interested in the will returned to "The Berries" to hear it read.

There were only six persons present.

They were Mr. Drudge, the solicitor, Mr. Richmond and Mr. Weston, the two gentlemen who had been appointed executors, and Dolly, Martin, and Rupert.

"I am about to read," began the solicitor, "a will that is the essence of eccentricity. I hope that you will all give your closest attention to it."

And then he read this most strange and curious of wills. It set forth how he had been unable to decide which of the two, Rupert Kendrick and Martin Walbrook, should become the husband of Dolly. Therefore he had left it for the gods to decide. His whole fortune, with the exception of £1,000 each for his executors, was left to the one who married Dolly. The fortunate man was to be decided upon in a remarkable manner! A special marriage licence was to be obtained, and, a month from the date of the reading of the will, she was to proceed to the little village of Smalldeane, a hamlet five miles midway between the stations of Tongberry and Hazelwood, in Sussex.

She was to wait, in bridal robes, at the door of the church there, until her husband-to-be appeared.

Rupert and Martin were to depart from the Central Station, Brighton, by the 11.30 train that called at Tongberry and Hazelwood, accompanied by the executors.

One was to get out at Tongberry, the first station, and the other at Hazelwood. They were to draw lots to decide which shall have the five-minute advantage this entails.

The will stated that the competitors must travel the whole distance to Smalldeane on their feet. They were at liberty either to run or walk, but when they reached the church they must be immaculately clad, and not in a slovenly state.

The one who reached Dolly first was to marry her!

When they heard the provisions of the will the audience was thunderstruck.

"Are you," gasped Walbrook to Dolly, "are you going to offer yourself as a prize in this manner? If you do not, the money will come to you in the ordinary way, and you can marry whom you will."

"I promised," replied the brave girl, in measured tones—"I promised my father to abide by his will!"

* * * * *

The weeks slipped by. Dolly prepared for the eventful day. She knew the locality well, and so did the others. The little village of Smalldeane was Mr. Meredith's favourite country place, and every year they used to spend a month there. Last summer both Walbrook and Kendrick had visited them, so the conditions were equal.

She refused to meet either of her lovers till she was married! But every day, and every hour of the day, she prayed to the God Almighty to give wings to Rupert's feet.

Tuesday, February 19th, came round at last. The day before Dolly had gone to the little inn at Smalldeane in order to be ready. There was a heavy fall of snow during the night, and in the morning the ground was covered.

In a first-class carriage there sat, as the 11.30 train steamed out of the Brighton Central Station, Rupert and Walbrook, with the two executors.

"We had better decide," said Mr. Weston, "who is to get out at Tongberry."

As he spoke he folded up two pieces of paper; on each of them was written the name of a station.

He put them in his silk hat, shook them up and held it out to Walbrook. He drew; it was marked Tongberry.

"Your luck has begun early," remarked Rupert bitterly.

Soon the train stopped at Tongberry, and Walbrook got out, accompanied by Mr. Weston. A set look was on his face, and he pulled his moustache vindictively.

To Rupert the train seemed hours going to Hazelwood. When it did reach the platform, he was out ere it stopped.

Turning his trousers well up to avoid the splash of the thick mud he covered with long strides the road that lay beween him and his love. He soon left Mr. Richmond far behind.

How slow his progress seemed! Where, he wondered, had Martin got to? Would he win or would he lose? Every thought to him was an agony.

Smalldeane lies in a valley midst the Sussex Downs. At last he reached the hill that overlooks the village. Straight in front of him was the opposite hill down which Martin Walbrook must come.

He was not in sight. Could he have already reached the goal! Surely not. In Heaven's name, no!

Rupert stopped to turn down his trousers and to flick off one or two specks of mud on his clothes.

He looked up and suddenly saw a figure tearing down the opposite hill at full speed. Something told him it was his rival!

Madly he started racing down the incline. Kind Providence directed his steps in the clean places. The church lay at the very foot of both the hills. Blindly he ran on, rushing heedlessly past the amazed villagers.

Thirty yards more to go! Walbrook was coming at lightning speed. Ten yards more to the lych-gate. The same difference separated it from Walbrook.

Now they were through.

Side by side they raced up the path; their hats had been discarded long before.

In front of them was their prize—Dolly, and nigh on a million pounds!

She stood there in an agony of suspense. Which would reach her first—the man she loved or the man she hated?

Now they were almost on her, Rupert, thank God an inch ahead. The other, in a frenzied moment, put forth his hand to push aside his rival.

In doing so he lost his footing, slipped, and fell ignominiously in the slush of the snow.

With a faint cry, Dolly sank fainting in her lover's arms. When she recovered, Rupert Kendrick's name was filled in the blank space of the marriage license, and they were wed.

Of Martin Walbrook, nothing need be said.

P. Reeves Shaw.

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SPLENDID NEW SERIAL YOU CAN START TO-DAY.

Dupes of Destiny

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

By Blanche Eardley, Writer of "The Bond Between."

PROLOGUE.

A YOUTH is in the private room of Messrs. Samuel Sharpe and Quirke, solicitors, awaiting the head of the firm's announcement as to whether he is the heir to the baronetcy of the late Sir Basil Wingate or not.

Mr. Sharpe says:

"You will remember, Mr. Rust, at the reading of the will, the title, which by special remainder he had power to dispose of, and the money were left by Sir Basil Wingate to the elder son of his run-away only daughter, Helen Jerningham, *should* she have one; and failing a son being born to her, the title and the money *with* the estate, should go to you, his nephew; afterwards to *your* son—should you marry, or to the *son* of your daughter; no child of the feminine sex directly inheriting it."

He then tells Cyprian Rust that, hearing Helen Jerningham went to Australia, he has extensively advertised for her in Australian papers, but with no effect. Therefore he congratulates his listener on becoming Sir Cyprian Rust.

The solicitor is called out of the room, and Cyprian Rust sees on the table an unopened letter with an Australian stamp. The address he recognises as being in the handwriting of his cousin, Helen Jerningham!

Is it written to announce the birth of a son and heir? If so it would rob him of the legacy at the eleventh hour!

A step sounds outside the door. Quickly Cyprian Rust thrusts the letter into his pocket. He hurriedly says good-bye to Mr. Sharpe, and when he reaches his hotel he reads the missive. It tells how Helen Jerningham has left Australia, so that the future heir—if a boy—may be born in England!

Sir Cyprian Rust carefully burns the letter that might have dealt the death blow to his ambitions, and mentally resolves to go to any extremes to retain the title.

Meanwhile Helen Jerningham is dying on board an ocean liner in giving birth to twin sons.

From incoherent remarks that she makes, the physician who attends her is led to believe that a secret is attached to the boys' history. But she dies ere she reveals her name or the boys' identity!

Many years later.

MARCELLA RUST, daughter of Sir Cyprian, finds a spade guinea which a mysterious man has hidden underneath the mat outside a certain room which she has been forbidden to enter in their home, Wingate Court, Crawley. Her curiosity is naturally aroused, and she tells her father of the occurrence. He seems annoyed at her alertness.

Sir Cyprian learns, through the Rev. Philip Nullius, that a dying woman wishes to see him.

He goes to see her, and she shows him a later will of Sir Basil Wingate, by which all his property is left to the descendant of Helen Jerningham unconditionally. Sir Cyprian snatches this will from her, and she dies before she can inform anyone else.

Sir Cyprian visits Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox, where he meets Mr. Caleb J. Johnson, millionaire and City magnate, who is in love with the hostess. The baronet, who has Lady Violet in his coils, forces her to swear to take particulars of the millionaire's house and property.

Late in the evening Johnson proposes to Lady Violet. Knowing her position, she, of course, refuses him. As she does so, the palms in front of the window part and a man lurches heavily into the room.

Lady Violet recognises him as her husband—a former Major in the Army, who has been separated from her for many years. Hastily she requests Johnson to leave; then turning on her unwelcome visitor, she by threats prevails upon him to go.

In the corridor this Society ruffian encounters Sir Cyprian, and sees upon his watch-chain the Sign of the Spade.

Edward Day proposes to Marcella. Being refused, he angrily lets fall an allusion to Marcella's dead mother.

Lady Violet overhears this, and, with blazing eyes, dismisses Day, who acts as her secretary, from her service.

She makes him an allowance of £250 a year, and gives him a letter of introduction to the millionaire, Caleb J. Johnson.

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TENTH CHAPTER.

"The Ruby Duncoran Company."

"A THREAD once broken can never be cemented together again! We must let the loose strands go now and consider new ones."

The words of Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox reiterated in the brain of the millionaire Caleb J. Johnson, as he strolled to and fro in the room he had set apart as an office in the suite he occupied at the Dovermarle Hotel in Piccadilly.

It was a few days after the dinner party at Lady Violet's, and the financier's strangely impassive countenance grew exultant as he murmured softly:

"There is no thread on earth, my lady, that Caleb J. Johnson cannot pick up and fix as he wants! I have put you before me as the one possession desirable to complete my success socially, and I mean to have you—in spite of your fears, and the unfortunate *contretemps* of undesirable male relatives cropping up to intervene. Fate intended you to be mine, my beauty, and had I met you earlier in my life—well, the hands of Caleb J. Johnson may have been a little cleaner, his life a little less seared by mistakes."

Something like a sigh escaped the millionaire's lips as he opened a drawer in his desk and took out a faded photograph, at which he gazed intently.

"You were my millstone!" he muttered. "I tied you round my neck and you pulled me down, until I took the plunge that rid me of you. Your romantic ideas bored me, and your houri-like beauty was a constant reminder of the folly I had committed in marrying you before I made myself the master of your father's will!

"A rich woman would have been my saving, or even a clever one—but a beautiful doll was less than useless! I only congratulate myself that our ill-fated marriage had no aftermath of revengeful children to rise up and slay me! You are dead—at least I hope so—and I am free to woo my lady with the proud eyes and the shabby relative!"

He replaced the photo, and closed the drawer, then turned suddenly to see that there was someone standing in the doorway. It was a man with a dark, livid face of an uncommon type, and he was dressed in the garb of a clergyman.

Caleb J. Johnson looked at him angrily. "You have made a mistake, sir," he said curtly; "this suite of rooms belongs to me! Who allowed you to enter them?"

The stranger bowed apologetically.

"Forgive my intrusion," he began, in a rich, resonant voice, "but I told the servant I would come and see you without the formality of being announced. You will remember, Mr. Johnson, that I wrote you about the rebuilding of some almshouses in my parish at Crawley. They are sadly needed, and I thought you might be able to help me, since I saw that you had never refused a donation for the poor; and passing through town on my way back I dared to personally attempt to see you!"

A dry smile flickered across the lips of the financier. The terse, straightforward speech of the impecunious curate tickled his sense of humour.

"Ah!" he said slowly, "I recollect now; you are that parson who wrote to me from Crawley—Philipsomething or other."

"Philip Nullius," replied the younger man gravely.

The financier laughed. "Nullius signifies 'no one,' if I recollect my school-days. An ominous title for a man who wants to get money out of people. They don't like throwing it away, you know! By the way, can't the Squire of your parish help you?"

"Sir Cyprian Rust has been good in the past," said the curate, with a slight flush. "We cannot always be asking him; but I won't trespass upon your time any longer, sir. I will bid you good-day."

"Stop!" And Caleb J. Johnson's large white hand arrested the departure of the curate. "Before I help you I have a right to ask questions. Is Sir Cyprian popular in the parish? I have known of him some years, and would like to hear something about his home life."

The curate hesitated.

"I think he is," he said slowly. "But not so much as his daughter, Miss Marcella Rust."

"Ah!" murmured the financier, with twinkling eyes. "She is Sir Cyprian's heiress, is she not?"

Philip Nullius drew himself up stiffly.

"I am afraid I am not in a position to discuss Miss Rust's affairs," he said coldly.

The financier looked at him oddly. "I am interested, not curious," he replied drily. "I knew the daughter of Sir Basil Wingate, the former owner of the Court, rather well in bygone years, the present owner interests me also."

"I am sorry I spoke hastily," explained the curate. "But I know very little about the Court; I am only a recent comer to Crawley, and have only heard that Sir Cyprian is a great collector of rare pictures and curios, and Miss Rust is our Lady Bountiful."

Then, after receiving a substantial cheque for the almshouses from the blunt millionaire, Philip Nullius took his leave. Outside the hotel he passed a hansom, ignorant that the face of the girl seated beside an older woman lit with a sudden flush as he walked past.

"Who was that, Marcella?" said Lady Violet quickly, noting the blush and drawing her own conclusions.

"Mr. Nullius, the curate at Crawley," the girl answered. "I wonder what he is doing in town?"

Lady Violet sighed. The curate was handsome certainly, but hardly the sort of man about whom Marcella should blush, and she wondered in what view Sir Cyprian would regard it.

In the meantime Caleb J. Johnson was thinking in his office at the Dovermarle Hotel.

The face of the obscure young curate attracted him strangely. It reminded him vaguely of one of those shadowy memories that he kept on a back shelf in his mind.

"A great collector of rare pictures," he murmured thoughtfully. "I should like to see those pictures—they must be worth viewing since Sir Cyprian retires from the vanities of the world to collect them!" He laughed suddenly. "So the curate, Mr. Nullius, seems to be attracted by the winsome Marcella, who is the nearest approach to her aunt in beauty I have ever seen."

Then moving to his desk he picked up a paper, and cast his eyes over it.

"The best names in the kingdom," he mused thoughtfully. "We will send this through with a swing. Bailey has prospected the mine, and the name of a mining engineer like Bailey stands to insure confidence at once. Within ten days we will float it, and I prophesy that the rise of the shares in the Ruby Duncoran Company will send a flutter through the heart of both shareholders and brokers alike." He laughed softly. "Then, when I have seen it fairly launched, I shall take a well-earned holiday and marry Lady Violet."

As he seated himself in an armchair there was a knock at the door, followed by the appearance of a hotel servant.

"A gentleman to see, you, sir."

Caleb J. Johnson looked at the card in the man's hand, then turned to the papers on the desk.

"Show him in," he said curtly; "and I am engaged while this gentleman is with me."

The servant bowed and left the room, to re-enter again followed by a quiet-looking man, well dressed, almost too carefully so, with an alert expression in his eyes that suggested a journalist on the look-out for "copy." His manner was deferential, but not obsequious, and there was no trace in his appearance of that flurried nervousness common to most

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people in the presence of a multi-millionaire, probably for the first time in their lives.

"Ah," said Caleb J. Johnson, slowly, "you have news for me, Mr. Hewett?"

Mr. Hewett, of the firm of Hewett and Hewett, Private Inquiry Agents, bowed.

"Yes, Mr. Johnson," he answered. "I think I have traced your man."

The financier twisted a piece of paper in his hand with an absent look.

"Ah, that's well," he murmured; "you must understand, of course, that I wish the man no harm, personally; but I wish to prevent his doing any to my friends; and his manner of entering a lady's drawing-room was not exactly one warranted to inspire unbounded confidence in him. I am merely obtaining this knowledge so that I may frighten him and assist the lady he annoyed. Women can never manage these things. They are a prey to every disreputable relation that comes along."

Mr. Hewett bowed. Being a man with a very fair knowledge of human nature, he understood the index that prefaced this prologue of the financier.

"I quite see, sir," he answered politely. "Of course my inquiry naturally began with the lady herself; for we always learn what we can about the friends or relations of a person we wish to trace. And as you could only describe him without giving me his name, I had to make a careful note of her ladyship's friends during the last few years. And at last I discovered the identity of the man in whom you are interested."

"Yes," queried Caleb J. Johnson, carelessly, "and who is he?"

"Her ladyship made an unfortunate marriage when a girl." Mr. Hewett continued; "the man was by birth and education a gentleman, but by inclination a scoundrel. He drank to such an extent that he was cashiered from the Army, and went abroad, her ladyship pensioning him off on the condition that he never returned. His allowance was paid regularly by the solicitors of her ladyship until about eight years ago, when the man ceased to apply for it, common report getting about that he had been killed in some skirmish out in South Africa."

The financier carefully unrolled the piece of paper he had twisted, then looked at the man opposite to him.

"I see," he murmured, "the fellow I have deputed you to discover, Mr. Hewett, is the 'late' husband of Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox?"

"Yes; Major Frayne-Lennox is the gentleman you saw coming through her ladyship's window."

The financier slowly folded up the scrap of paper in his hand once more. It seemed to require a great deal of thought, for it was some time before he spoke. When he did his voice was a trifle more conciliatory in tone.

"And that is all you found out, Mr. Hewett? I would be prepared to pay well for any detail regarding that gentleman's life."

Mr. Hewett smiled. "I think I can oblige you, Mr. Johnson," he said. "I discovered that just before he left the Army he had altered the figures of a cheque given to him to pay some expenses of his brother officers. It had been a private cheque belonging to the Colonel, and when the crash came the matter was not brought forward, entirely on Lady Violet's account, as everyone sympathised with her."

Yet again the financier's fingers played with the piece of paper.

"Did you hear the name of the officer who had given the cheque?"

"Yes. It was Colonel Lyster—now a General, retired. He lives in chambers in Pall Mall."

Caleb J. Johnson drew his cheque book towards him deliberately, then jotted down a few figures on a blank cheque.

"For the information you have given me, Mr. Hewett, I will double your fee," he said slowly. "I suppose you did not find out whether Major Frayne-Lennox had left England?"

"He is still in London," replied the inquiry agent. "I could not discover his address, though; but I will try if you like. I will do so with pleasure."

The financier rose and handed the cheque to him.

"Oh, it really is not important," he said carelessly; "but you might call round here between eleven and twelve in the morning, should you have fresh news. I am quite content with what you have told me."

When the well-dressed agent had disappeared, the financier sat down and wrote a letter. It was to a man to whom he had often given good tips, and who was under some obligation to him. His name was Corbett—the Honourable Jim Corbett, and he knew everyone in Society worth knowing.

The financier began his letter by mentioning that he had a few private shares to dispose of in the new company he was promoting—the Ruby Duncoran Mine—and suggested that the Honourable Jim should buy some; then he went on to say:

"*I shall be dining at the Carlton on Thursday; can you join me? Oh, by the way, there is a chap I want to meet, rather. I suppose you know him—General Lyster. You might mention that you are dining with me, and suggest that if he wished to know a good thing, he might accompany you. Anyway, get him to come along with you. I am interested in someone he knows very well.*"

The following day a telegram was sent to the financier's suite of apartments. He was out, but when he returned later, the contents of the telegram appeared to please him. They were:

"*Thanks dinner. Delighted. Lyster coming.*—CORBETT."

On Thursday evening the table the millionaire had had reserved for him was to be seen occupied, about half-past eight. The figure of Caleb J. Johnson was as well-known as Nelson's column, and many were the envious glances sent after him.

His guests were two men of entirely different types. One was the Society moth, the Honourable Jim Corbett, languid, aristocratic, and with a will like pulp. The other was a tall, military-looking man, with white hair and an aggressive moustache. His eyes were fierce, and his chin receded.

Caleb J. Johnson knew how to entertain, and his wonderful tact and natural magnetism drew out the latent powers of conversation in the old General.

He led him into a money market discussion, and concealed a covert smile at the old soldier's ignorance of the City jargon.

"I can arrange to let you have those shares, General," he said slowly; "they are a few private ones I am not throwing on the market, but letting my friends have a look in. The 'Ruby Duncorans' will make a 'corner' in rubies soon. This is your chance. It's a slap-up concern."

"I shall be most happy to avail myself of your offer, Mr. Johnson," said the courtly old soldier; "I am not too richly endowed with this world's goods to refuse such a chance."

"That will be all right," the financier said carelessly; then added: "Do you ever remember to have heard of a friend of mine, General—Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox?"

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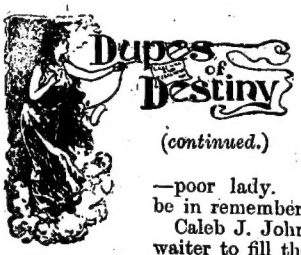


(*continued.*)

The eyes of the old man sparkled with a sudden fire.

"Remember? I should think it impossible to do otherwise. That scamp of a husband made it impossible to ever forget her—poor lady. Her only happiness must be in remembering he is dead."

Caleb J. Johnson made a gesture to the waiter to fill the liquor glasses again.

"Yes; it was very sad," he said slowly. "By-the-way, didn't you suffer at the scoundrel's hands?"

General Lyster started, then laughed bitterly.

"Yes; I did. I gave into his care a cheque for the amount of fifty pounds for some sports a few of us were getting up, and the beggar added two 'noughts,' making it five thousand. Certainly the cheque was carelessly filled in; in fact we were all in a state of hilarity bordering on horseplay, and to my shame I could never swear that I had filled in the amount in writing. Anyway, I was the loser."

The financier leant forward; the Honourable Jim had gone to chat with a friend; they were alone.

"I say, General," he began, "you will think me an odd fellow, but I want you to sell me that cheque. You can't use it now the poor wretch is dead, and as I am shortly announcing my engagement to Lady Violet, it would please her that I should destroy it. I am prepared to pay you the amount it is forged for—five thousand pounds; that's a fair offer."

"But—but," murmured the General, dubiously, "it hardly seems a right thing to do, Mr. Johnson. I swore to hand the cheque over to the police should that scoundrel put his foot in London. But when I heard he was dead, I forgot the incident."

The financier took his cheque-book from his pocket.

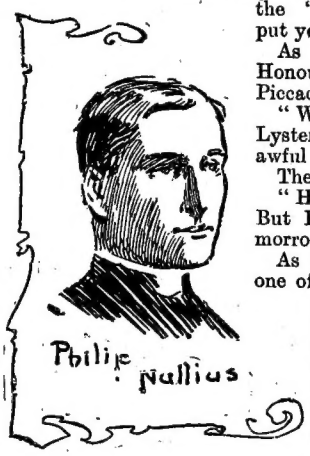
"Here is the cheque for the five thousand," he said slowly. "You will be a wise man, General, to close with the bargain. I can afford it, and Lady Violet—my future wife—will be pleased. May I expect the cheque by return?"

The lean, old hand closed on the piece of coloured paper. The money was a much-needed item in his household, and the fear of offending the financier even a worse terror than the debt.

"Yes," he said slowly; "I will send the cheque by return. I would hesitate to do it, only I am sure it is all right, since you are to marry Lady Violet, Mr. Johnson. As her future husband you have the right to receive the dishonoured cheque and to destroy it in her presence."

Caleb J. Johnson laughed softly.

"It shall be destroyed in her ladyship's presence, General. She wishes it. Don't forget those three hundred shares in the 'Ruby Duncoran.' I will put your name down for them."



As the financier and the Honourable Jim were strolling up Piccadilly, the latter said curiously:

"What did you want with old Lyster, Johnson? He is an awful old bore."

The financier smiled.

"He did not bore me to-night. But I can't answer for him to-morrow."

As he was giving directions to one of his clerks the next morning an express letter was brought in to him. He opened it, and smiled quietly as he saw the cheque that some years ago had been dishonoured through the conduct of Lady Violet's husband.

"Now I hold the trump card!" he laughed. "The rest will be easy; Lady Violet shall begin to order her trousseau."

When, during lunch—which he took alone—an interruption came in the shape of another card, Caleb J. Johnson was not annoyed.

He looked at it and smiled slightly. "Ask the gentleman to wait," he said, and then went on with his lunch thoughtfully.

The name of the man on the card was that of Edward Day, the nephew of the woman whom Mr. Johnson intended to marry.

ELEVENTH CHAPTER.
Married in Haste.

Half an hour later Edward Day left the Dovermarle Hotel with a pleased expression on his face. His interview with the great financier had been more successful than he had anticipated, and the letter of introduction which he had presented from Lady Violet had sent his ship straight into port.

He had been treated with interest and an almost personal kindliness by the millionaire that had flattered his wounded self-esteem.

After a few leading questions the financier had held out a promise of seeing his way to giving Lady Violet's nephew the post of confidential secretary, and he would hear definitely in a day or two.

As he turned into Bond Street, Edward hailed a hansom, and telling the driver to go to No. 19 Guilford street, Bloomsbury, settled himself back with a sigh of relief.

"That's pretty nearly certain, anyway!" he muttered; "and the screw will be a good one. A man like old Johnson won't dream of giving less than at least a thousand a year. Lady Violet's letter seemed to strike him. Let me read it again. It's just as well to keep copies of letters—especially some that may be useful."

He took out his pocket-book, and, unfolding a piece of paper, read the duplicate of the letter he had given to the financier:

"Dear Mr. Johnson,—*Will you do me a great favour? My dear nephew, Edward Day, wishes for a post of some kind, and I wondered whether you could help him to one. He is brilliantly clever, and not without expectations. As I am particularly fond of him—he being the child of a dear younger sister who died, I will be greatly indebted to you if you can help him. I would ask no one else this favour but yourself, for I feel that I may rely on you to do what you can for him. I have told him that I am speaking for him to you, but have not told him the contents of this letter, so please do not let him know all I have said to you. I shall know, if you assist him, that you have given my letter the only answer I wish for.*—*Always yours sincerely*,—Violet Frayne-Lennox."

"That was a jolly improvement on the original!" the young man laughed. "I fancy dear aunt Violet's eyes would open if she could know how successfully it went down! And if I play my cards well, I shall get back a little of what I have lost. Then that haughty young Marcella shall learn that it is not always wise to kick those at your feet!"

His face grew savage, and he swore softly under his breath, as the scene of a few days ago came back to him.

"Yes; the ship's foundling shall get his own back one day, and then I shall be in a position to make them smart. But I must pacify Lottie, and not let her guess anything, except that I have quarrelled with Lady Violet; that will be enough for her to know."

As he got out of the hansom, a fair, anxious face pressed against the window of the house it had stopped at, lit up with an expression of relief and joy, then vanished into the room.

He rang the bell, and after an instant's pause, it was opened by the owner of the face at the window. The door closed behind him, then two clinging young arms were flung round his neck, and a high clear voice, cautiously lowered, cried gladly:

"At last, dear old boy! I was afraid something had

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happened to you, and was imagining all sorts of awful things about inquests and mortuaries! It is just lovely to know that you are safe and well, though a naughty, late boy!"

"For goodness' sake, Lottie!" he whispered pettishy, "don't let the whole house know the depth and breadth of your feelings. If you have no respect for the common conventionalities, you might at least refrain from making me look ridiculous. And," he continued, "I wish you would let the servant come and open the door; I am always telling you about these little things. I hate exhibitions of this kind! And you will persist in doing what you know I hate!"

By this time they had reached the drawing-room on the first floor, and the girl, whose exuberance had suddenly evaporated, shut the door, then turned a coaxing, roguish face to him.

"I'm always offending you now somehow, Edward!" she said wistfully, "but it is because I love you, old boy, that I must rush down to meet you. You have come so seldom lately that the time drags from day to day. Then, when I got your letter saying you would be here this afternoon, a whirlwind seemed to get into my heart, and I longed to see you and tell you that I did not care how poor you got, or what poverty we had to face, so long as we faced it together, darling. For you are all I have now, Edward, and my love has grown stronger with each heart beat!"

The young man submitted with a perfunctory air to the warm, loving caresses of the girl, whose brilliant loveliness was touched by a deep emotion. Yet she was not of the type from whom most men would turn.

She was of medium height, slenderly made, but her face lacked depth of expression by reason of its extreme prettiness. Her blue eyes of a deep sapphire hue were as easily turned to mirth as tears, and the full, red lips lacked decision, although the wealth of tenderness in the generous curves repaid any lingering regrets for the wanted strength of character.

"There," he said, disengaging himself from her arms. "I am very glad to see you, dear, of course, but I wish you would learn a little more repose of manner. You are too exuberant, too loud. If only you could see the perfect self-possession of my cousin, Marcella Rust!"

A change crept into the weak, lovable face, a certain metallic hardness into the tone of her voice when she spoke, that made Edward Day deplore the slip he had made in mentioning his cousin, for his vanity caused him still to claim kinship with the proud girl who had repulsed his advances.

"Your cousin, Marcella Rust," she repeated slowly. "You have often said that I was the most perfect creature in the world. That was when you wished to please me for the furthering of your own ends. Now you hold up your cousin, Marcella Rust, to me—me," she exclaimed in a louder key, "the woman whom, in spite of her want of manners, you made your lawful, legal wife; and now you are ashamed of me!

"Oh, Edward," she exclaimed passionately, "don't be so cruel to me! I have submitted to a great deal—to a secret marriage until you had come into the money you were expecting on your twenty-fifth birthday. You promised to take me to your aunt, to make me known to your people, to acknowledge me as your wife."

Edward Day bit his lip savagely. In a moment of quixotic chivalry he had married the fascinating chorus girl some months ago, binding her to secrecy.

And now the tie was beginning to jar on him, as he realised that he, a future man of wealth, was married to a woman of whose doll-like prettiness he was already tired. But he saw the expediency of pacifying the slumbering jealousy he had carelessly kindled in her towards Marcella Rust.

"Don't be a little goose," he said, drawing her to him with a careless gesture. "You are my wife, so why be jealous of Marcella Rust? It was on your account that I quarrelled with my aunt, and was in turn ordered out of her house for ever."

"I am your wife!" she cried passionately. "I should come first with you, as you do with me."

"On my account?" murmured the girl, her face lighting with a gleam of happiness. "Oh, darling, did—did you tell her you had a wife?"

He pressed her head on his shoulder, so that she should not see the sneer on his mouth, as he answered glibly:

"Not exactly, sweetheart. But she wished—nay, ordered me, to propose to Marcella Rust, and when I refused—because I already had the dearest little wife in the world—she disowned me, and told me to leave her house for ever."

"But why did you not explain, darling?" murmured

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Lottie timidly. "If your aunt had known that you were already married, she would have understood?"

"Yes," he said with a short laugh, "and immediately have cut off the pittance she is allowing me now. She would never have forgiven me if she had learnt that I had contracted a marriage with an actress. She is awfully proud of our family name—and all that rot!" he finished airily.

Lottie slowly withdrew herself from his arms, and faced him with a curiously-strained expression on her delicate face.

"So you were ashamed of me," she said in a lower voice, "Is it possible for a man to be ashamed of the woman who is his wife, and who has proved her love for him by leaving the profession she was happy in in order to fit herself for the position she would occupy as his wife? You can't mean me to understand such a cruelty, Edward?" she cried passionately.

"I am your wife, and should come first with you, as you do with me! As you have left your aunt's house, then you intend that we shall take a flat together and live openly as husband and wife. Oh, my dear, I shall be so careful of your money, and our home will be a nest of peace and joy!"

"For goodness' sake, Lottie," he exclaimed angrily, "don't romance! I don't intend anything of the sort—at least, not for some time," he added quickly, seeing a white look on her face. "We can't possibly live together on £250 a year, and I don't mean to try.

"What I suggest is that you return to the stage, it will be quite easy as you are pretty well known, and I try to get a post that will help me to make a decent income before we join forces. Now, don't begin to howl!" he said wearily. "When I am thinking out the best way for us both, you hinder me by weeping! Why can't you look at things in the same light as I do?"

A forced smile fluttered across her mouth. "Because I am still in love with you, I suppose," she said simply, "and commonsense and love never walked hand in hand. I will try to understand that you wish me still to keep up the farce of being a single woman; to wear my wedding-ring hung around my neck instead of on my finger. To laugh and act as though I had nothing to worry me, or any regrets in my life."

"Well, yes," he said uneasily. "I want you to help me by keeping our marriage a secret until I get the money that will be mine soon, and make an income that will insure a beautiful home for you, my darling. It would kill me to see you working about a house like a servant. Come, smile, and say you understand I am doing all for the best—for us both!"

Her face softened. "It is hard to have always to live a lie, Edward, but of course you know best, and it is only because I love you so that I resent being kept away from you. I have lost all interest in the stage since we married, but will soon get back into it, and will save all I can, so that I can help, you when we get into our own home, dearest.

"But," and she flashed a sudden glance into the careless handsome face looking down into her own, "you will not let that cousin with the perfect repose of manner come between us? I hate her! I feel that I should be conscious of her presence near me in a crowd, if Marcella Rust were there."

He laughed lightly, his vanity pleased at the show of jealousy.

"Silly girl! Marcella is older than you, and dark and stately. She has not the pretty ways of my fluffy kitten. So you must not be a little goose. I am going out of town for some days, so you must not expect to see me until I stand before you. You had better get out of these rooms into cheaper ones, and see at once about an engagement

"I will leave ten pounds with you now, and send more soon. Address me at 20A Northumberland Avenue, if you want to write, and I will write you care of the *Era*. Now," he continued quickly, "I must be off, dear. Don't mope, I will do all I can to get a good billet, so that you can come to me."

He took her in his arms and kissed the yellow hair and red mouth carelessly. He did not notice her strange chilliness as she responded mechanically to his caresses.

He released her gently, and put an envelope in her hands.

"That will help you, dear. I will send more soon. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," she said quietly, gazing at him with tearless eyes. "I shall be all right, don't worry about me, Edward. Write when you can."

As he whistled up a hansom he looked back to wave a last farewell to the girl whose heart he had wounded. But the window was vacant, and he laughed uneasily as he muttered:

"Perhaps it will be just as well if she does forget me. I have a career to carve into which I want no woman to intrude now that Marcella has failed me, and this girl is only a dead weight. Fool that I was to have put such a noose round my neck! I mean to cut off the old life from the new! Poor Lottie will feel it at first, but she will soon buck up when she is back on the stage."

He lit a cigarette and smiled at his reflection in the mirror on the side of the hansom. As he turned his head he did not notice another hansom passing his with a man in it, who looked at him curiously, then at the house he had just left.

"Well," muttered the man with a slight Yankee accent, "what is Lady Violet's nephew doing at a house like that? He has some little secret in that shanty, I saw it in his face. I shall keep my optic on that particularly smart young man. Knowledge is power—to financiers!" And with a chuckle he relapsed into other thoughts as he went on his journey to Euston, *en route* to spend a week-end at the house of a certain peer whose name he was eager to place as a director on the board of the Ruby Duncoran Company.

In the meantime the girl Edward Day had said "good-bye" to was standing in the middle of the room with a pale, set face and gleaming eyes.

"He has gone," she muttered. "I felt that he was deserting me—leaving me a wife, and no wife! And the reason of his strange conduct is not so much the desire to make a home for me as to shake me off like an old glove." She laughed hysterically. "Me! Lottie Haste! Who threw up good chances on the stage to marry him secretly. And now he has deserted me!

"I felt it. All the time he was speaking I knew he was lying to me! His eyes, his voice, all told me that I was listening to a liar, and that liar was my husband!" She clenched her hands passionately. "The cause of his cruelty to me is another woman—the woman he held up to me as a paragon of perfection—his beautiful, stately cousin, Marcella Rust! She has changed him, won his love; and now I am nothing to him!"

She flung herself down by a chair and buried her head with its confusion of corn-coloured hair in a cushion.

"And I loved him so!" she sobbed. "I loved him so!"

TWELFTH CHAPTER.

"Danger Point."

Marcella was back at the Court. Her brief visit to London had been all too swiftly spent; the days with Lady Violet had whirled by in a succession of breathless sunrises and sunsets, a panorama of vivid life pictures had held her fresh imagination captive; and from that restless, buoyant existence her father's word of command had drawn her back to the white patch of monotony at the Court.

Life at the Court meant what? The daily, common round of country duties, a drive or walk into the village, a ramble in the woods on a cold day when the wind nipped her face into a tender red; a dull dinner at houses where she had no possible sympathy for or with the tedious guests, and afterwards tea.

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where she met the same commonplace faces that she saw week in, week out. And on Sundays the stroll to the village parish church, where she listened to the lessons and sermons preached by the Rev. Philip Nullius, the curate.

Those Sundays compensated for a lot with Marcella. Unconsciously she looked forward to them, and counted the days, and as the end of the week drew nearer, her eyes would glow more deeply with anticipation, and her mouth become softly dimpled with the knowledge that after the service the handsome curate would, by some strange, wonderful accident happen to catch her up, and then, for a brief, flashing moment, she would live in another world—a world made up of radiant, glowing colours, ranging from deep sapphire to a rich, gorgeous purple and sea green, a medley of tints that seemed to make a rainbow in her heart when the curate's dark, wistful eyes met hers in a sudden glance. So life at the Court was not all drab.

Suddenly an exclamation made them turn quickly. The butler, Wermen, was leaning against the sideboard with a livid face and quivering lips.

"Marcella," said Sir Cyprian one morning at breakfast, "I have a friend coming to see me this evening, an old college chum, now a doctor. His name is Slade—Dr. William Slade, of Harley Street. He will be here for a few days."

"That will be nice for you, father," Marcella answered absently. "I often wonder why you have so few friends down here; you must feel fearfully bored at times."

Sir Cyprian smiled. "A man with a hobby like mine, that of art collecting, and finding old, rare pictures in the world of art, has little or no time for boredom, my dear."

"Oh, that reminds me father!" she said quickly. "I read in yesterday's *Telegraph*, that the house of the financier, Mr. Caleb J. Johnson, has been broken into by thieves, and among other beautiful things stolen was the wonderful double of the picture, 'Mona Lisa,' of Leonardo da Vinci's. The one like Aunt Violet's copy, and you told me to tell you all about it! You remember? I saw it in the second hall; it just faced the dining-room.

"At first you would hardly know it was there, because of a heavy portière that was nearly always drawn to prevent it attracting thieves, at least, that was Mr. Johnson's idea. He said he made an exception in revealing to me the secret place of his precious picture.

"He valued it more than all the other things in his house so he told me. And I had the distinction of being shown the hiding-place! Only he and a devoted man-servant knew where it hung. Mr. Johnson told me all about it, and said he would not trust it alone in a drawing-room full of friends unless he or his servant were on guard. And now it has gone! I am so sorry! I trust the thief will be caught."

Sir Cyprian laughed. "That is one of the penalites of being a great man—everyone wants to rob you! I recollect you telling me all about the 'Mona Lisa,' my dear, and was interested at the time. I wonder whether they have caught the thief! It must be difficult to dispose of the picture."

Marcella rose from the table. "Wermen," she said, "bring me this morning's *Telegraph*, there is sure to be an account of it."

The old servant hesitated, and sent an anxious look in the direction of the master of the Court.

"Yes, yes, bring the paper, Wermen," smiled the baronet. "Miss Marcella is interested in the subject, having been the last person privileged to see it. Besides, the thief may have been caught."

Marcella's eyes sparkled. She was not a cruel girl, her heart was very tender, but she loved to see wrong vindicated, and having a personal knowledge of the affair made her especially eager.

"How sorry Aunt Violet must be to hear of it!" she said, while they waited for the paper. "She was almost angry with Mr. Johnson for showing it to me! In fact, she was quite upset when he said he always kept his word, and had promised to show it to me. She refused to go with us, although he begged her to."

Sir Cyprian's eyes gleamed with a strange expression as

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(continued.)

they glanced over the girl's head at the old servitor who re-entered the room with a paper in his hand.

"Your aunt is foolish," he said slowly, "she is almost quixotic in her sense of duty; one would imagine that she feared to be mistaken for the thief!"

Marcella laughed. "Aunt Violet is a darling! I love everything she does. Ah, here's the paper! I will read the account, father."

Before Wermen could reach the baronet, Marcella had taken the paper from his hand. The eyes of the old man met those of his master with a frightened expression.

"Miss Marcella is old enough now to read even such cases as robberies, Wermen," said Sir Cyprian softly, and Wermen fell back silently.

"Here it is!" cried Marcella excitedly. "The police, after due investigation of the robbery at the house of the financier, Mr. Caleb J. Johnson, have come to the conclusion that the work is that of no novice, and in several details they strongly suspect that the subtle cleverness of the whole thing is due to the master mind of a notorious criminal, whose deep, uncommon method in planning out each separate 'crib' is not unknown to Scotland Yard; though the man's personality is yet unknown to them, they have strong reason to suspect that it is the work of a master-brain in the high art of robbery, who does credit to the sobriquet bestowed upon him by the police—that of the "Spade"—a very apt name for so brilliant a thief, who digs for his lesser brethren in the art to work upon the plans he lays. One thing puzzles the police—that is, that owing to the secrecy regarding the picture, only an inmate of the house, or a particular friend could have betrayed the hiding-place!"

Marcella laid down the paper thoughtfully. "No friend could be such a worm," she said heatedly. "I hope they will catch that horrid man they call the 'Spade.' I shall follow this up with great interest, because of Mr. Johnson."

Suddenly an exclamation made them turn quickly. The butler, Wermen, was leaning against the sideboard with a livid face and quivering lips.

"Father!" Marcella cried. "What's the matter with Wermen?"

Sir Cyprian rose and took the old man by the arm.

"Don't be anxious, child," he said slowly. "Wermen is sometimes taken like this. He suffers from fits."

Gently, and with great care, Sir Cyprian led the butler into the hall, and closed the door behind them.

"What's the meaning of this piece of folly?" he said sharply. "Can a girl frighten you now? Good Heavens, man! I've a great mind to send you off, and let you go to the dogs! You are ceasing to be a help, and becoming a nuisance!"

The old face quivered; then Wermen said painfully, "I'm very sorry, sir, but—but something strange came over me, and the young mistress' words sounded prophetic-like, and I could not keep back the feeling that our luck was at an end!"

Sir Cyprian shook him roughly. "You old idiot! I wonder that any luck stays while I keep on such a doddering old idiot as yourself! Let me warn you again, that if I see any more nonsense, you shall go—bag and baggage! I want *men* round me, not old women! You understand?"

Wermen nodded. "Yes, sir, I'll try, but the pain in my 'eart gets bad sometimes and I can't 'elp giving way; but don't turn me off, sir; I—I—couldn't stand that!"

"Couldn't you? Well, it rests with yourself whether you go or stay! If you are sensible you may keep on in a good house till you die, but if you go on rousing curiosity, and finally suspicion by your rotten conduct, I shall chuck you out once and for ever!"

A curious look stole into the old man's face.

"If you send me down, sir, you come too!"

Sir Cyprian's face hardened. "I fancy you will find it hard to pull me down, my good fellow; I am no fool, I warn you, and you had better remember that. Don't let me hear such language again—or you will be sorry!"

As the bent figure shuffled off, Sir Cyprian went back into the breakfast-room.

"Wermen had a heart attack," he said slowly, "I told him to go and lie down."

Marcella was standing near the window, and the baronet's eyes flashed suddenly as they rested upon the coils of dark brown hair and the slender shaped figure of his daughter.

"By-the-way, my dear," he said slowly, "have you been that walk to Danger Point yet? The view is particularly lovely—especially at this time of the year, when the bay is nearly always caught in a hurricane of wind and storm. They say there are no women left in Crawley who will go there because of the strength of the gales, but it is worth risking one's comfort for to stand on Danger Point during this weather."

"I've heard of it," she said brightly, "and will prove that there is one woman left in Crawley who is not afraid of the elements nor of the lonely Danger Point. I will be a credit to you, father, dear! Will you come too?"

Sir Cyprian shook his handsome, fair head. "No, my dear; I am an old man nearly. I would be crippled with rheumatism if I climbed Danger Point."

She laughed lightly. "Why, you are quite handsome, father, in spite of having a grown-up daughter! I wonder," she went on softly, "whether your love for mother was so deep that you could never marry again?"

A paleness crept into the rich colouring of the baronet's face. "Don't talk to me about your mother, my child. It is a subject I cannot bear, even now!"

"Dear father!" she whispered tenderly, holding her face up to his; "I will try by love and care to fill the void in your heart! I sometimes want mother as much as you do!"

When she had left the room, a curious expression stole into Sir Cyprian's eyes. "You're a clever, nice girl, my dear; but I am afraid that Fate may rob me of you! You are too good and sweet for this world, and it is truly said that, 'whom the gods love die young.' I am glad I let that insurance go!" he muttered. "What is £20,000 compared with two country seats, a town-house and £15,000 a year? No! It was just as well that Destiny took matters out of my hands just then.

"She is a gold mine to me—now. Violet dare not speak; and no one but myself knows of the later will the woman wanted to give the curate, in charge for the children of my dear cousin Helen! Marcella is *my* daughter—none can dispute that; and—Marcella has made her will in her father's favour! Should anything—happen at any time to Marcella—the other document can be found in some casual way—afterwards, and then my child's will can prove that I was innocent of such knowledge before!"

He smiled as he gazed out of the window. The sky looked lowering and a storm hung about the atmosphere, and the wind howled dismally through the trees.

"Danger Point is unpleasant at any time!" he murmured thoughtfully, "and to-day, of all days, Danger Point may prove fatal to anyone risky enough to climb it in the gale! I wonder how Violet would feel if she were here! I owe her one for her disobedience which my daughter innocently frustrated! She would not like her niece to be out on Danger Point to-day!"

Then, with a silent laugh, he went to the door of the forbidden corridor, and opening it, disappeared into the darkness, while the door closed noiselessly behind him.

THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

In the Heart of the Storm.

"Well, Rust—this is a change from the old college days of economy and anxiety about ways and means, eh?" laughed the genial man of medicine, Sir William Slade, of Harley Street fame.

He had a good face, shrewd and full of kindly humour that

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had won him more patients than he knew how to manage. He had long promised to pay a visit to his old friend, Cyprian Rust, and, after many years, he had torn himself away from London and foregone a Continental visit to please the fascinating friend of his youth.

They eyed each other curiously. Twenty odd years had wrought a change in the doctor, one that tinted his hair with grey and lined his face with a network of wrinkles. But Sir Cyprian had retained his fair, boyish curls and laughing blue eyes; only in the expression of his mouth did the doctor note the ravages of Time.

"Yes," said Sir Cyprian, "we have both improved our prospects, Slade; you are a useful member of Society, I only a drone, living on the fat of the land!"

"But where is your daughter? I have heard a lot about her!"

"Oh, Marcella has gone out for a walk. She is fond of outdoor rambling," answered his host carelessly; "she will be in to lunch."

But at lunch Miss Marcella had not arrived, and after a short time spent in waiting for her, Sir Cyprian and his guest sat down without her.

"There's going to be a storm!" remarked the doctor, "I hope Miss Rust will not suffer!"

Sir Cyprian smiled. "Oh, no; she is accustomed to the weather signs here, and will seek some shelter."

"I am rather fond of a storm at sea," said Dr. Slade. "In the early days of my career, after I had left the hospital, I was a ship's doctor on a liner running between England and Australia—one of the *P.* and *O.* vessels—a very fine one, too, And I shall always remember my last voyage home, because a very pathetic incident happened that had a dramatic finish."

Sir Cyprian looked interested. He was in high spirits; as the storm rose so did his good humour.

"Tell me," he said pleasantly; "I wish Marcella were here to listen to it also; your yarns are bound to be worth hearing."

"Oh, its only merit is its truth," replied the other. "It is a human story, and I always remembered it. A poor soul among the third-class passengers died giving birth to two boys. Before she went she tried to say something that would affect the after-life of the boys. But in the middle of the sentence, in giving the surname, she died. I always guessed that those two children were concerned in some family mystery, but there was no clue to anything, so they went the way of all unknown waifs. And at the time of their birth a similar storm to this one was raging. It's odd that I should think of it now!"

A fine champagne glass in Sir Cyprian's hand snapped sharply, and the sparkling, foamy liquor made a patch on the cloth.

"What became of them?" he asked.

"Oh, the woman was buried at sea, and the boys flourished; one was taken up by a philanthropic lady on board, the other no one wanted, so I believe he was sent to the workhouse. Anyway, it was a strange thing, and was the talk of everyone on board at the time."

The baronet tilted his chair back and looked at his old friend through lazily closed eyes.

"And you never heard any more about her? No one inquired?"

The doctor shook his head. "No; the whole thing was speedily forgotten—a nine days' wonder, no more. But the poor creature had a beautiful face! It's a strange world!"

Sir Cyprian rose quickly and faced the window, without speaking. His mind was made up. Those waifs must be found! He must ascertain how and where they were living, or whether Fate had removed them from their inheritance by death. He had considered the story of the woman who had sent for him to Digges Row to be the fantasy of imagination; but the cool, unemotional Harley Street doctor would not have related a romance for the sake of creating an effect.

It was the first time that he was forced to acknowledge the possibilities of the sea story being true, and if true, then dangerous to himself, and—and Marcella! Yes, he must know where to lay his hands upon those sons of the dead woman whose name he fancied he could tell. He did not like to imagine that a surprise might lurk in the shadowy future, putting him out of court and robbing him of that title and honour dear to him through years of association.

He turned from the window just as a flash of lightning played among the silver on the table.

"The storm is beginning," the doctor said; "I'm sorry for anyone out in the open. Are you sure there is no cause for alarm about Miss Marcella?"

Sir Cyprian smiled. "No," he answered; "she knows her way about blindfold, and rain has no terror for Marcella; her hair curls naturally!"

A low, fierce rumble followed by a crash that reverberated among the hills lying close round, shook the room.

The baronet lit a cigar and puffed silently at it. In the rings of smoke that rose after a while, he saw a bleak promontory, storm-beaten on either side. Sir Cyprian knew that it was as much as a *man* could do to keep his feet on that rock in the gale.

He laughed suddenly. "Come, Slade! Let us go to the library. Marcella is beyond our care! We can just hope!"

* * * * *

When, after breakfast, Marcella started for the walk her father had mentioned, the sky was clear and there was a pleasant freshness in the air. After a sharp walk of about an hour's duration, she came upon the gaunt rock on the coast-line known locally as "Danger Point." Even in the brightness of a wintry sun it had a sinister look, and, gazing down from the heights she had climbed, Marcella shivered.

"I did not think I had reached such a giddy eminence!" she thought; "but now I am here, I will make a tour of this rocky headland; the name is suggestive of weird possibilities! And to make my visit more uncomfortable, I see a storm breaking. The gulls are flying very low!"

She struggled and panted with the exertion of battling with fallen pieces of rock and the rising wind. Finally, she reached the furthermost extremity of Danger Point, and for a moment stood wrapped in involuntary wonder and admiration at the scene that lay below her.

The sea, like an angry giant roused from slumber, showed its white-crested waves in snarling contempt, and dashed with heavy booms against the massive rock.

After a while Marcella turned to retrace her steps. She felt awed and curiously afraid. The wind had risen suddenly, and shrieked a chorus of mocking laughter in her ears.

The descent was more difficult than she had imagined. Three times she fell, spraining her wrist against a piece of boulder and grazing her ankle.

For a time she was forced to rest; her hat had gone, and the wind had torn the hairpins from her head.

She staggered to her feet and brushed the wisp of wet hair from her eyes. A sudden flash of lightning, followed by a roar of thunder, made her cower in fear of her life. "Father! He will think I am lost!" she cried aloud. "It will break his heart! And Aunt Violet's! Oh, I must not die! I will cling to this piece of rock until the storm has passed. I dare not stand again; I shall be swept off my feet over the Point!"

Suddenly, while she lay in a partial stupor, a sound like a faint echo reached her. She dragged herself into a sitting posture and listened. Again she heard it, and this time her heart bounded with relief.

"There is someone below; perhaps father has sent a servant or come himself!"

With an effort she gave one loud, piercing shriek, that seemed to be carried seawards, then turned her face towards the steep, rocky way she had traversed earlier. After a time, a low sob burst from her lips. The voice had not answered!

As she flung herself down again, to save herself from another gust of furious wind, a man's face rose above the lower rock.

Their eyes met; the man smiled, and scrambling over the rock, made his way to her side.

(Another long instalment of this serial next week.)

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THE NARROW ESCAPE OF J. STONE, BACHELOR.

It lacked five minutes of the time for the departure of the 6.30 express from Euston station, and the carriages were rapidly filling up. Jared Stone, a well-dressed, meek-looking little gentleman, had just got comfortably settled down in a corner of a first class compartment, when he heard a familiar voice addressing him.

"Why, hello, Stone; how are you? I'm right in luck to-day. I was just looking for someone to take charge of Aunt Martha's bundles and assist her out of the train with them when she reaches Manchester. You're going through, of course?"

"Y—yes," answered Stone, faintly, as he glanced up and recognised his friend Raemond, with his arms full of bundles of all shapes and sizes and "Aunt Martha" grimly looking up behind him like one of Napoleon's Grenadiers.

Now Jared Stone was of a decidedly shy and retiring disposition, besides being a fossil of an old bachelor (Stone was fifty, still single, and not only willing, but anxious to remain so), and if he could have had his choice he would sooner lead a bayonet charge, face a gang of mutineers or a midnight burglar, or encounter almost any other trifle in that line rather than take charge of a woman and her luggage during a railway journey. Therefore the reader will kindly imagine the remarks (they will hardly do for print) that Stone made under his breath as he got up and, with forced politeness, bowed the waiting female to the seat next to the window.

"Thank you," said Raemond, as he began piling bundles on Stone's feet and into his lap, which ever came the handiest; "I knew you'd just as soon do me the favour to take charge of Aunt Martha as not, and I'm glad I happened to run across you. She is a trifle hard of hearing, and—er—a little eccentric in some respects, but you'll find her first-rate company when you get acquainted with her. By the way, I came near forgetting to introduce you to each other. Mr. Stone, this is my aunt, Miss Martha Eakins." Then, raising his voice, he shouted: "Aunt Martha, allow me to present my bachelor friend, Mr. Stone, who will look after you and see you safely off the train with your luggage when you reach Manchester."

"So good of him, I'm sure. Happy to meet you, Mr. Stone," responded Miss Eakins, with what was meant to be a winsome smile in Stone's direction.

At this moment the starter's bell rang, the train began slowly moving out of the station, and with a hurried "good-bye," Raemond dashed out of the compartment, leaving Stone alone to face the responsibility of delivering Miss Eakins and her collection of luggage safely at Manchester station—a responsibility which even the bravest of Stone's sex might well have hesitated to face.

Now, Stone, as I have previously intimated, was not cast in a heroic mould. He was a timid little gentleman, measuring probably five feet two in his patent leathers, and his great aim in life, so far as the so-called gentler sex was concerned, was to leave them severely alone and quietly flock by himself, as Lord Dundreary used to express it.

Miss Martha Eakins, on the contrary, though she had chiefly flocked by herself through five-and-forty simmering summers and the same number of dreary winters, had done so unwillingly and under protest, as it were.

For a full quarter of a century the tall and stately Miss Eakins (who loomed nearly a foot above Stone, and looked every inch a Grenadier, as I believe I have before hinted) had been on the matrimonial bargain counter—she had a snug little fortune in her own right—waiting patiently for some enterprising and appreciative gentleman to appear on the scene and take possession of her willing heart and other personal property. But, alas! Thus far her waiting had been in vain. Among her list of acquaintances other maidens, young and old, attractive or otherwise, some with fortunes and some without, had been taken, and she alone had been left to mourn over the perverseness of mankind.

Much brooding on the subject, coupled with her infirmity of hearing, had at last resulted in the harmless delusion that every man who treated her at all politely was desperately in love with her, and as Stone had not been warned of this fact, it can readily be surmised that his present position was one of extreme peril—that is, so far as his peace of mind was concerned, at least.

After several tunnels had been passed and the train had emerged once more into daylight, Stone transferred most of the bundles from his lap to the rack overhead, and presently ventured upon the remark that it was a fine day.

"Beg pardon, sir!" said the female Grenadier, suddenly straightening up and glancing inquiringly at Stone.

"I said it's a fine day," explained Stone, raising his voice to a shout.

"Gay? Oh, well I try to be, but it's rather hard sometimes for a lonely female to keep up her spir——"

A clammy perspiration broke out on Stone. "Excuse me," he interrupted, hastily, "I said a fine day; not gay, but day; d-a-y, day!"

"Say? Let them say what they've a mind to. I fancy Martha Eakins has got money enough, so she doesn't ask any odds of anybody—present company excepted. Of course it is different with you. The minute my nephew introduced us to each other I felt that we were going to be friends—intimate friends, as I may say."

Stone's face was now the colour of an Italian sunset, and he was earnestly longing for the bottom to drop out of the carriage and let him through, or for some other catastrophe to come to his rescue, but as usual in such cases his longings were in vain.

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"Yes, Mr. Scone, the very instant I set my eyes on you I said to myself, here is a congenial soul, a man that I can trust; and I hope we shall have no secrets from each other. I am rich, but wealth is not all that is worth living for. You may be poor, Mr. Scone——"

"My name is Stone, madam, not Scone," shouted the embarrassed bachelor, "and if you will change the subject to something less personal I shall be greatly obliged to you."

"Obliged to me? Not at all, Mr. Spone. No obligation whatever. I am only too happy——"

"Great Heavens!" groaned Stone; "what on earth is the old lady driving at, I wonder?" And then raising his voice, he fairly howled: "Madam, your nephew expects me to see you safely out of the train at Manchester, and I'll do it, but in the meantime I propose——"

"To read my papers in quiet until we reach your station," Stone was about to say, but Miss Eakins was too quick for him. Her ear caught the word propose, and that was enough for her. The supreme moment of her life had arrived at last—or at least she thought it had—and with a cry of joy she flopped over on Stone's shoulder, knocking his hat off and sending it spinning on to the floor, and nearly smashing in his ribs against the side of the carriage.

"Oh, you dear, good man, I felt sure right from the start that you were going to propose! I knew the symptoms well, and—— What's the matter, lovey? Haven't been taken ill all of a sudden, have you?"

But Stone, who had wriggled out of her embrace, leapt to the other side of the compartment, and, fortunately for him, the train was just slowing up at the first stop. He tore open the door, and slammed it to. Then dashed down the platform to the guard's compartment. The stop was brief, and as the guard signalled the driver to go ahead and turned to enter the train, he noticed Stone for the first time. There was no time for explanations, and both leapt into the carriage.

"Great Scott!" cried Stone, puffing hard to get his breath. "That was a narrow escape. If I hadn't got away when I did I should have found myself a married man before we arrive at our destination. Do you want to earn a five-pound note?"

The guard was not quite sure of the man's sanity, but keeping a sharp eye on him, he intimated that a bank-note of that denomination had its charms.

Then Stone told his story.

"If you'll go to about the fifth carriage when we make another stop, you'll find in one of the compartments a six-foot female, all alone. You might tell her that I am dead, and that the remains would like their hat."

"Yes, sir."

"And then, when you have done that, if you will see that she doesn't find where I am and keep her from coming here to slobber over me, and help her out at Manchester with all her goods and chattels, and get her away from the station so that I may go on my way in safety, I'll put another note on top of the first one."

"All right, sir; leave it to me," responded the guard with a smile.

And all the rest of that journey Jared Stone rode in the guard's van. And fearfully he peered from the window and watched every movement of the dangerous and gigantic female when at last the station was reached and the passengers poured out upon the platform.

Not until he saw the cab into which she had been deposited with all her luggage disappear out of the station, did he emerge from the train, and then only to leap into a closed carriage, which the guard had secured for him.

He vowed to himself that that ten pounds was the best investment he had ever made in his life.

M. Williams.

MOTHER: "I am surprised that you would suffer a man to kiss you." Daughter: "But, mamma, I wasn't suffering."

Your Editor Chats.

THIS is the first number of a volume in which I intend to surpass all my previous efforts to keep *Short Stories* at the head of all papers of its class, and to maintain the position it has ever held—that of first and foremost. None of my contemporaries can boast of such an array of renowned contributors as I can. Blanche Eardley, R. Norman Silver, Louis Tracy, George Griffith, to mention but a quartette of favourite authors, all write regularly for the paper. The illustrations are drawn by well-known and gifted artists. My staff are always on the look-out for new and original features, and readers can testify to the result of their vigilance. Week by week the popularity and circulation of *Short Stories* are increasing, and I enter upon this new volume with a light heart, because I know that I carry with me the confidence and esteem of all those that regularly subscribe to this journal.

I HAVE an excellent programme for the new volume already mapped out. I have serials ready for you by your most-admired authors, and an abundance of splendid short stories. Next week will commence our new series, and in the same issue "A Criminal Millionaire" will conclude.

"Decoyed!" is the title of the new series.

"Decoyed?" you will naturally exclaim. "Who were decoyed, and by whom were they decoyed?" This you will learn by reading the instalments, each one of which is thrilling to a degree. It would be unfair to let you into the secret beforehand, so I will simply say that additional interest is lent to the series by the fact that they are written by the decoy herself, *who actually underwent the experiences she relates.*

Don't forget that "Decoyed!" commences next week. Let your newsagent know that you want a copy of *Short Stories*, and ask him to reserve you one. Otherwise you may have great difficulty in obtaining one.

ON page 19 there appears the sixth Unsolved Love Problem. Gerald Dacre is in imminent danger of forfeiting his honour, so I am offering a prize of one guinea to go to the reader who sends in what I consider to be the best course for him to pursue.

Your arguments should not exceed one hundred words, and should be written on one side of the paper only. State as clearly as possible the reasons why you consider the course you advocate is the right and honourable thing for him to do, and send in your replies to reach these offices not later than Friday, January 10th. None arriving after this date will be considered, and my decision as to the winner will be final.

Mark your envelopes "Sixth Love Problem" in the top left-hand corner, and address them to "The Editor," *Short Stories*, Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.

MY heartiest thanks are due to all those readers who sent me Christmas greetings and congratulations on the Christmas number.

Your Editor.

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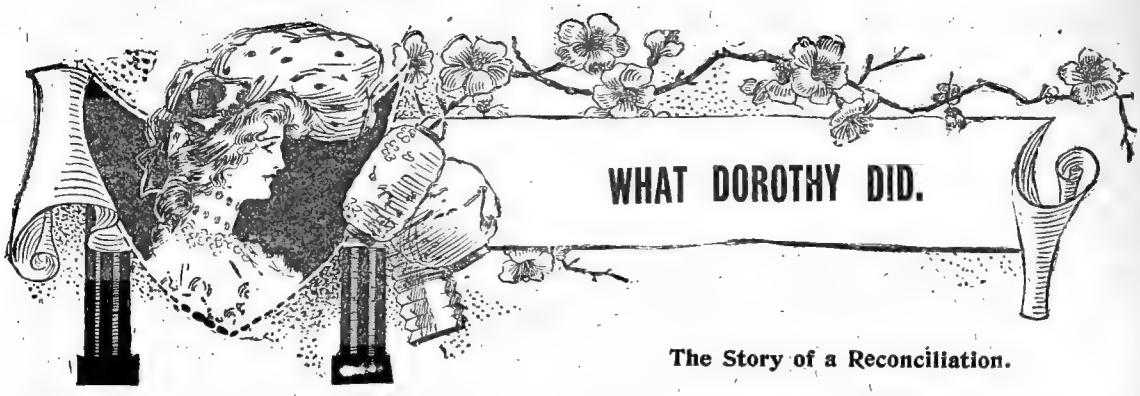

WHAT DOROTHY DID.

The Story of a Reconciliation.

"WHAT are we to do?"

It was Lily the practical who put the question. Barbara the beautiful only heaved a portentous sigh, and said nothing.

"Let apartments!" Dorothy said bluntly.

"Oh!" exclaimed Barbara.

"Dorothy!" chimed in Lily.

"Well, and why not? We've this big barn of a house on our hands, and half of it we never use. Why not turn part of it into profit? Luckily, it's our own. The only sensible thing the dad did was to buy it. You are lucky, Lil, you earn a little money. Poor Barbara, I am afraid you never will! Between us we can just manage to exist in decent comfort. If we could find a nice elderly gentleman, or a married couple to take the drawing-room floor, we could afford ourselves occasional luxuries, new songs, a theatre sometimes."

"How," said the beauty of the family, "will you set about it?"

"Advertise, of course, or reply to an advertisement."

"It seems so dreadful!"

"Nonsense! Besides, it won't affect you. Anna Maria will wait on them, and I can do the cooking. Lily will be away all day, and you, Barbara, can sit in the morning-room just as you do now, and forget that there are lodgers in the house."

"Lodgers!" murmured Barbara.

"Yes, lodgers," said Dorothy. "May as well call a spade a spade while you are about it! I'm going to get a newspaper and answer some advertisements."

As Dorothy West had said, it was indeed very lucky that their father had invested his money in the house he lived in. For when he died, it was found that little, if anything, was left for his widow and three daughters.

Dorothy, the eldest, had a small annuity left her by a godmother; Lily, who was the youngest of the trio, promptly obtained a situation, and avowed her intention to earn her own living. But Barbara—beautiful Barbara—remained to ornament the home, while Lily toiled, and Dorothy found some music pupils.

Six months previous to the conversation here chronicled, their mother had gently faded out of life, her one regret being that she was leaving her dear ones to fight the battle of life alone.

They were far more fitted to do so than she, poor, pretty, fragile little thing, had ever been! And now the question was, what were the three girls to do?

Dorothy's determined attitude, while it paralysed Barbara, was backed up enthusiastically by the practical Lily. For the next few days the pages of advertisements were eagerly scanned in the hope of discovering a pleasant and elderly couple, who required two charming furnished rooms with every attendance (Anna Maria, in a smart cap and apron—Anna Maria, who, if small and cockney of tongue, would have worked her fingers to the bone for the sake of her three mistresses) and good cooking! Many letters were written in answer to such as seemed suitable.

"We can afford to pick and choose," said Barbara.

But a fortnight elapsed, and only one applicant had responded, and he proved to be a young man of rather too prepossessing appearance who was not willing to pay the week in advance that Dorothy the businesslike demanded.

But one September afternoon a treble knock and ring startled the door of the big house in the Camden Road, and, all in a flutter, Anna Maria, arrayed in snowy cap and apron, fled to open it.

The callers were a young man of thirty and a pretty, fragile-looking girl of ten years younger, and Anna Maria ushered them into the drawing-room with some trepidation.

"Oh, she is pretty, miss!" whispered she to Dorothy. "But, oh, so sad-looking! And he's—oh, he's a gentleman, I know! Why, he actually took off his hat, and he wiped his feet on the mat, and we ain't had any rain for a week!"

Dorothy West put on her most businesslike manner and went to the drawing-room. Anna Maria was right, she was very pretty, the fragile-looking wife. Dorothy noticed she had drawn off her glove, and was wearing a wedding-ring that had not been long on the finger.

Ten minutes later all was settled, and even the first week's rent had been paid. Dorothy noticed how pleasant the husband's voice was, and how tenderly he spoke to the girl beside him.

"Name?" he remarked, in reply to Dorothy's question. "Oh, yes!" But he hesitated slightly and turned to his wife in a manner that Dorothy afterwards remembered. "Oh, yes, Chesterton, please! And we will come in in an hour's time. Dearest, I think you will be happy here."

"With you, Walter," murmured the wife, in so low a voice that Dorothy only just caught the words.

"Lily, we're let!" was her greeting to the youngest sister on her return home that evening.

"And Dorothy is as excited as—as I don't know what!" said Barbara, looking up from her book.

"Oh, nothing ever excites you!" said Dorothy with a laugh.

"Are they nice?" asked Lily, pausing in the act of taking off her hat. "Old or young? Pair of old frumps, I suppose."

"She is the prettiest woman, except Barbara, I have ever seen, and he looks like a nobleman in disguise."

"Thanks!" said Barbara.

"Good gracious!" was Lily's comment.

"There they are," exclaimed Dorothy, "coming in at the gate."

Lily peeped cautiously from behind the curtain.

"Now, wasn't I right? Isn't she lovely?"

"And they paid a week in advance!" cried Barbara, quite animatedly for her.

"That's satisfactory!" said practical Lily.

A fortnight later the entire household in the Camden Road were metaphorically in love with Mr. and Mrs. Chesterton. Anna Maria vowed that it was a delight and a joy to wait upon her, she was so gentle and so thoughtful. Dorothy had

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succumbed completely to her charm. In fact, the three girls were enchanted with Eunice Chesterton. And the husband was so essentially a gentleman that Barbara at once suggested that there was quite a mystery about them.

"Rubbish!" cried Dorothy, using her pet expression. But all the same she felt that Barbara, who had the happy knack of hitting the right nail on the head, was not altogether wrong in her surmise. Why was the girl-wife in the drawing-room so pale, and why did Dorothy more than once or twice catch her in tears? Mr. Chesterton went out but little, and his devotion to his pretty, pale wife was unbounded, but Dorothy noticed that she never allowed him to see or know of those times when her white face was buried in sofa cushion or pillow, and Dorothy, passing upstairs, caught the sound of sobs and tears.

Another strange thing was that no letters ever came for husband or wife. The former appeared to have plenty of money, for he lavished hats, and gowns, and trinkets, on the wife he so plainly and manifestly adored. The rent was forthcoming to the moment.

"It is most curious," said Dorothy, when the Chestertons had been there about two months, "and I must confess it puzzles me."

"What matters it?" said practical Lily. "It's no affair of ours."

"Yes, but it makes me miserable to see her miserable face. And she ought to be the happiest woman in London."

The very next day, hearing Eunice Chesterton weeping, Dorothy took the bull by the horns, and boldly walked into the room.

"My dear!" she cried. "This will never do!"

Mrs. Chesterton sat up with a look of deep trouble on her white face.

"Don't tell Walter!" she exclaimed.

"Of course I shall not, but I think you are making yourself ill. Let me help you, dear," and Dorothy put her girlish arms round the slight figure and drew it close to her own.

"Tell me the trouble," she said.

Dorothy took the bull by the horns, and boldly walked into the room.

"No, I cannot—I cannot. I am weak and foolish, and I have dragged him down in the world, ruined his life for ever! Oh, why did I do it?"

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Dorothy with emphasis. "Why, you couldn't do such a thing if you tried, you poor pale, pretty child!"

"But I have!"

Dorothy West, moved by an irresistible impulse, kissed her tenderly.

"Nonsense!" she said, as Eunice Chesterton clung to her broken-heartedly. "Dry your eyes and come and have tea with Barbara and me. I shall have to be very angry with you. You are alone up here. Now, don't say no, I won't let you. You must come—Eunice."

"Oh, I knew how good and kind you were," said the unhappy little woman, "the first moment I saw you. Please call me that. Except Walter, I haven't a friend in the world."

"Oh, yes you have—four, in this very house. Come along with me!"

And the masterful Dorothy carried her off, tearful cheeks and all, downstairs.

"Promise me," said Eunice at the door, "you will not tell Walter!"

And Dorothy promised. Tea and toast, a bright fire, and Dorothy's chatter brought a smile and even a touch of colour to the pale face before long. When her husband returned, she ran out to meet him with a bright laugh.

"How good of you, Miss West," he said brightly. "Why, little woman, you look a different girl. I am so glad."

She clung to him like a child, and slipped her arm through his in a tender manner.

"It was Dorothy," she said shyly, but looking up lovingly into his handsome face.

After that day Dorothy and Eunice became firm friends. But, do what she would, the former could not penetrate the evident mystery that surrounded the Chestertons. That there was a mystery was perfectly plain.

"I feel sure," said Barbara, "that it is a romance of some kind," when she heard what Eunice Chesterton had said. "He has married beneath him, and she——"

"Rubbish! Why she is a lady from head to foot."

"What does that matter? He may be the heir to a title, and she—well—a poor nobody."

"Reading too much fiction," said Dorothy bluntly, "has turned your brain, Bab."

"Truth is stranger than fiction," said Barbara, oracularly. "And this is not fiction, it's a copy of *Tittle Tattle*."

"More fictitious than some novels, my dear," said Dorothy. "Let me see it," and she took up the paper.

"Listen to this!" she cried.

"'Strange rumours are current in Society concerning the mysterious disappearance of Lord Walter Chesterton, the only son of Viscount Chesterton, who has not been heard of for some weeks. Family disagreement is hinted at in some quarters, in others a *mésalliance*. Whatever the reason, Society is discussing the topic with much——'"

"Dorothy!" exclaimed Barbara.

"Bab!" cried Dorothy.

The two sisters faced each other in silent amazement.

"Can it be?" said Bab at last.

"Impossible!"

"He is handsome enough to be a lord."

Dorothy laughed.

"My dear, good looks are not essentially the qualification to be a peer, or own a title!"

"I know that," said Barbara, "but——"

And it was "but," and a very big "but," too. Bab was certain, Dorothy was doubtful, Lily laughed in scorn.

"If I thought it were true," said Dorothy, "I should dearly love to bring about a reconciliation between them. I wish I could find out."

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"Ask Eunice."

"No, I daren't do that."

"Ask him."

"Worse still!"

"Then it seems to me you are in a *cul de sac*."

"Oh, no, I'm not! Not yet. I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"Wait and see," said Dorothy.

The next morning, leaving Anna Maria in charge, with Barbara as a refuge in the event of anything going wrong, Dorothy put on her hat and jacket and wended her way to a bookseller's. Here she asked for and obtained permission to refer to "Who's Who."

There it was, staring her in the face in plain print: "Walter, Lord Chesterton, only son of Viscount Chesterton," &c., &c. Turning up Viscount Chesterton, Dorothy found that his town house was 30 De Vere Square, and his country house Upton Grange, Bucks. Then she trudged through the rain back to Camden Road.

"I'm going to make that dear little girl a happy woman," she said to herself with determination, and added as an afterthought, "if I can."

"Where are you going in all this rain?" asked Barbara early that afternoon.

"Tell you when I come home," said Dorothy.

"You've got some mischief in your head."

"Oh, no! Wait a while, and you shall know everything!"

With which Dorothy went out. But when she knocked at the big front door of No. 30 De Vere Square, there was a certain amount of trepidation in her heart. You see, she had never faced a real live viscount before, nor had she ever gone on such a strange errand. But she pulled all her pluck to her assistance, and faced the gorgeous flunkey who opened the door with as much assurance as she could muster.

"His lordship is in," said the footman. "What name?"

Dorothy had provided herself with a card, and handed it to the man.

"Please say it is on particular business concerning his son."

This was quite at a venture, but our little curly-headed heroine was quite desperate by now. In a few moments the footman returned and somewhat contemptuously ushered her into a morning room, with the air of a man who disdained to wait upon anyone less than a duchess. Presently a little elderly man, looking, thought Dorothy, more like a tradesman than a peer of the realm, entered.

"I am Lord Chesterton," he said quietly. "What can I do for you?"

Dorothy trembled. Now she was actually face to face with her task, she could recognise its difficulty. And what would she do if Lord Chesterton thought it impertinence? However, she made a plunge.

"I wanted to speak to you," she said, "of your son."

The old man frowned.

"Do you know him?" Then he drew a step or two nearer to her. "Are you," he demanded sternly, "his wife?"

Try as she would, Dorothy could not resist a smile.

"Oh, no!"

"Then——"

"But I have met her, and, oh, she is the sweetest and prettiest woman in the world! I have come to plead to you to forgive your son."

"Did he send you?"

"No, no!" said Dorothy in haste.

"You are interested in them, then?"

"We are great friends, and she is fretting herself ill because she feels she has dragged the man she loves down in the world."

"So she has."

"You would not say that if you knew her," said Dorothy.

"You're a very enthusiastic advocate, young lady."

"I want you to see her," continued Dorothy, "and you will forgive her and him at once."

"You appear to know all about it."

"I know nothing but that she is in great misery. There is nothing about her for you to be ashamed of, Lord Chesterton. She is beautiful enough to grace a palace."

"She was a governess!" interrupted the old man, with half a sneer.

"What of that? Whatever she was, she is a lady in every sense of the word."

"Pooh!"

"Judge for yourself," said Dorothy, showing him a photograph which before coming out she had calmly abstracted from the drawing-room. Lord Chesterton took it from her hand, and studied it gravely.

"She is very lovely," he said at last.

"She is very unhappy! Lord Chesterton, make them both happy with your forgiveness. You must miss your son very much!"

"I do."

Dorothy felt that she had touched the right chord at last.

"Then take him back! What has he done that is so unforgivable? Married a good and beautiful woman—that is all his crime."

"I do miss him. But I am a proud man, young lady."

"Pride can be carried too far, Lord Chesterton."

"Where are they?"

Dorothy gave the address.

"Tell him to come and see me."

"No, you should come and see *her*. You will forgive him then."

"You plead very earnestly."

"My lord, I love her, and have done this to make her happy." Dorothy paused with clasped hands. The old man looked long and steadily at her eager, flushed face. Then he spoke.

"You are a very pretty and charming girl yourself," he said, "and will make a man very happy some day."

Dorothy's cheeks went rosy at this. She thought of a certain someone to whom a little word from her would mean bliss indeed. But that was another story.

"Supposing I do as you wish, what reward will you get?"

"None," said Dorothy. "You will come?"

"This afternoon, at four."

"I don't know how to thank you!" cried Dorothy, tremblingly, yet exultant that her mission had succeeded. The old man stooped over her hand and kissed it with old-fashioned courtesy.

* * * * *

"Whatever are you so excited about, Dorothy? What have you done, and what is going to happen?"

"Wait and see, Bab, wait and see," was all Dorothy said. On her return from De Vere Square she had almost frightened Eunice by throwing her arms round her with unwonted vehemence. Barbara was alternately annoyed and perplexed at her excitement.

Punctually at four o'clock Lord Chesterton arrived. Dorothy, who had been on the look-out, admitted him herself, and preceded him to the drawing-room. Throwing open the door with a beating heart, she announced him. Then running downstairs she startled Barbara by putting her head on her shoulder and breaking into a flood of tears.

"Father!" exclaimed Walter Chesterton.

Eunice, pale and frightened, rose unsteadily from the chair she sat in.

"My son!" said the old man, advancing into the room, "and—my daughter!"

The next moment Eunice was crying in his arms.

"Hush!" he said. "I have been wrong. Forgive me."

"But how did you come, and——" began his son, gripping the old man's hand in his own.

"You had better ask Miss Dorothy!" he said.

"Dorothy!" exclaimed the two in a breath. Then Eunice, with the quicker wit of a woman, guessed it all, and, slipping from her father-in-law's arms, fled downstairs to find Dorothy.

Clifton Bingham.

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Unsolved Love Problems.

A Prize of One Guinea is offered to the reader who sends in the most Satisfactory Solution to the Problem. Replies should not exceed one hundred words. See "Your Editor Chats."

VI.—THE HONOUR OF GERALD DACRE.

Under the yellowing chestnuts and ruddy beeches a slight, fair-haired girl, looking scarcely more than a child, lay sobbing in a man's arms.

"I cannot, I dare not, meet you again, Gerald. Father has forbidden it, and next week I am to go to Aunt Helen's to stay for two months."

A spasm of pain contracted the brow of the man who held her so tenderly in his arms: he knew she was being sent away to separate her from him.

"God knows how hard it is for me to say it," he replied, "but your father is quite right. I am not worthy of love—you must try to forget me."

"Oh," she cried, lifting her head and looking at him with childish, trusting blue eyes, "I shall always love you, whatever happens! Father said dreadful things about you yesterday; but I shall not believe them. I can and ought to obey him; but I shall always love you, and know you for an upright and honourable—— "

"Hush!" said Gerald, putting his hand lightly on her lips. "You will hear worse things said of me soon. Men will mock at the idea of Gerald Dacre being 'honourable.'"

"Oh, Gerald!" she cried, her eyes opening wide with horror. "What have you done?"

"Sit down, Eva, and I will tell you all about it."

The girl obediently sat down on a fallen tree, raising her eyes to the face of the tall man before her.

He was dark and very handsome; but there were lines on his face that should not have been there at his age, and a haggard look in his eyes that told of sleepless nights, and a care that would not be gainsaid.

"I suppose your father told you I had been gambling"—she nodded—"and that, knowing how my father and grandfather had got rid of all their property by that means, he did not intend to give you into the hands of an hereditary gambler?"

She cast down her eyes, and a blush of shame that such things should be said of her chosen lover flooded her delicate skin. He saw that she had heard strongly-expressed opinions about him, and he continued in a hard tone:

"Well, all that is true. I have been in the company of notorious gamblers, and I have played, and—I have lost—a large sum."

"Oh, Gerald!" she cried, starting up, and throwing her arms round his neck, "But you do love me—don't you?"

Poor child! Overwhelmed with shame and horror at this confession of—to her mind—deadly sin, she clung desperately to her sheet-anchor of faith in this man's truth.

"Love you?" he cried passionately—"more than my life—more than anything on earth. Oh, Eva, if you knew what your pure, trusting love has saved me from—what utter despair and sin! Listen. I must excuse myself to you, though I had intended honestly to put it all in its worst before you that I might alienate your heart from me. It would be best for you, dear, but," he added with a groan, "I can't go through with it."

Eva put up a gentle hand, and caressed his face. She knew not what to say—all this was beyond her ken and her experience of life.

Brought up with the greatest love and care in a country rectory, she was, at the age of eighteen, singularly childlike and simple. Life had hitherto presented no problems; all had been open and uneventful till the wondrous thing happened and she became engaged to Gerald Dacre—clever and of good family, but earning only a precarious livelihood as a journalist.

"Before God," he said solemnly, taking her hands in his, "I am no gambler! Cards and speculation have no fascination for me. The evil has arisen in that I thought I could touch pitch and not be defiled. Sir Noel Paton, though a gambler of not a good reputation, is the owner of one of the great morning papers, and I tried to make myself agreeable to him in the hope of getting an appointment on the staff, which would have brought our marriage to the verge of possibility. Well, he asked me to play a game of bridge, and I dared not refuse. We sat down laughing, and I rose up ruined. I had no idea how much I was losing with the frequent "doubling," and now I owe him £1,000—and this is all my wealth"—and he thrust his hand into his pocket, and brought out a handful of silver with a rare gleam of gold.

"What will you do?" cried Eva, looking at him with terror-struck gaze at the idea of such an enormous sum, as it seemed to her.

"Do?" he cried bitterly, "Nothing! What can I do? I have not the money nor any possible means of raising it. When the date comes at which it is payable I shall be declared a defaulter and a man without honour."

"Oh, Gerald," she murmured—"just for a game of cards? I know gambling is wicked; but if you can't pay you can't help it. It is not as if you had bought something and refused to pay for it. You could explain, and ask him to let you off."

In spite of his trouble Gerald could not help smiling at her ignorance of the unwritten law of men's honour, but answered shortly:

"No, my dear girl, that is impossible. Even your father's sermons must have taught you who plays must pay."

"But what will you do?"

"I don't know—go away, I suppose, where I am not known

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and live as best I can. But for you and your sweet love I believe I should have killed myself."

Eva shrank from the wild words.

"But that would have been wicked."

She was more than a little shocked at all these wicked things which seemed suddenly to have come so near to her, and, though she loved him dearly, she was shaken and spent with crying, and felt she could bear no more, so she held out to him the little turquoise ring he had given her, and said with a sob:

"Then it is really good-bye? Good-bye, my dear love. I shall never forget you. May God bless you and lead you to happiness wherever you go."

Gerald strained her to his heart, with a passion she did not understand, and partly feared, and said with emotion:

"All I have ever known of God, or of happiness, has come through you. Good-bye, my little love! This ring, with stones not half so blue as your eyes, shall be my talisman in the dark life before me."

Then he released her, and stood watching her slight figure as she passed slowly down the narrow woodland path, the ruddy brown beech trees dropping their leaves about her. At the bend she turned and waved a last farewell, and, with her handkerchief to her eyes, went out of sight—and out of his life, he thought.

Naturally, all the village knew more or less what had happened; and what they did not know they imagined, so that the tale, with varied embellishments, was soon going round the parish.

Marion Transome's smart London maid was brushing her hair and regaling her with this, the latest scandal, only a few days after Gerald and Eva had bade farewell in the wood.

Marion was a stylish-looking girl, though not quite of the best style. Her father, who "had made money in the City" (be it whispered low, in a tailor's shop), had built for himself a palatial barrack on the hill overlooking the little village in the valley below, and called it "Transome Hall." She was his only child, and had had a very expensive education, and when not over-dressed might have been taken for the real thing. She was not remarkably handsome, but many people admired her; and it goes without saying that she had received many offers, though she had not thought fit to accept any one of them.

"And so poor little Miss Burton has gone to London to be out of the way of that good-for-nothing Mr. Dacre—— "

"Sarah," cried Marion sharply, "you forget yourself! Pray don't presume to speak in such a manner of visitors to this house."

Sarah bit her lip, and was silent—her mistress was not wont to be so particular.

Truth to tell, Marion was suffering keenly for the sake of Gerald Dacre. Surrounded as she always was by flatterers and fortune-hunters, she had been much attracted by this poor, handsome young man, who paid her no compliments, and even appeared not to see when she made it plain that attentions from him would be very acceptable. She had not resented his becoming engaged to the pretty but equally penniless daughter of the rector; in an odd sort of way she respected him for choosing love and good birth to money; but she suffered all the same, and now especially the thought that he was in trouble gave her pain.

Having dismissed her maid early, she sat by the window, looking down into the valley, and pondered long and deeply.

"They say he has disgraced himself in some way, and the old rector has forbidden him the house and broken off the engagement; and she, the good, obedient child obeys. I would not. Had I been in her place and he in trouble no one should have parted us. Ah—if it had been I—— "

The next day she sent down a little note to Gerald:—

"DEAR MR. DACRE,—*Father wants to ask your opinion about a picture he has bought. Will you come up to-morrow afternoon and see it?—Yours sincerely,* M. TRANSOME."

Mr. Transome had more than once put money in Gerald's pockets in one way or another; and, disinclined as Gerald felt to see anyone, he did not like to refuse

"I shall have few enough people to speak to next month when all is known," he said to himself somewhat morbidly; "I need not anticipate my troubles."

So he went; and Marion received him in her most-becoming and quietest frock. "Father will be in directly; sit down and talk," she said in the frank, friendly manner that was her greatest charm.

It then struck Gerald that the picture was an excuse, for an autumn afternoon is not the time to wait about before seeing a picture. The idea that he had been brought there to be made to talk rendered him morose, and the conversation languished.

On her side Marion was too deeply shocked by the havoc trouble had wrought in his appearance to be able to keep away from the subject. It was a very real and deep sympathy that made her speak, though perhaps a more delicately-sensitive mind would have felt instinctively that it would be kindest so appear ignorant of anything out of the common.

"Mr. Dacre," she said impulsively, "I must speak. You are in trouble—can I help you?"

Gerald winced, but he said to himself, "After all it is pure kindness of heart, and not vulgar curiosity"—so he replied:

"I am afraid no one can help me, Miss Transome. I have lost money that I cannot pay, and next month I shall be known as a man who does not pay his debts of honour."

After all, there was a certain relief in stating the ugly fact in the crudest manner—and she was a woman of the world, not an innocent child.

Pity stirred within Marion, and her eyes filled with tears as she realised dimly what this descendant of an honourable—if dissipated—race would suffer at being unable to meet his engagements.

"But your friends—can they not help you?"

"My friends!" he cried. "They are not wealthy. The whole of my possessions, if sold, would not bring in a ten-pound note, and my friends are in the same condition. It would be an impossibility for them to raise £100 between them—how then £1,000?"

A sudden courage came to her.

"And why did you not ask me?"

A dark flush rose in Gerald's face.

"I am not yet sunk so low as to beg from a woman," he said with concentrated scorn.

"Oh, Mr. Dacre," she cried eagerly, "I was not thinking what I said. I was only sensible of how glad I should be if I were allowed to help as one of your friends might have done. The money is there, if you would take it, till you could pay it back."

"That might be years," said he. "No, Miss Transome, these things are not done by a man with a shred of self-respect."

"You would have taken it from Miss Burton had she had it," she burst out in a wrath born of the pain she felt and her inability to help the man she loved in his trouble.

"That would have been a very different matter," he said coldly.

She felt she had said more than was allowable, and, cut to the heart at his displeasure, and deeply humiliated by the knowledge of what she wished him to say, she sank sobbing into a chair.

Gerald was at a loss to know what to do; but he slowly crossed the room, and stood by her side.

"Pardon me for my rudeness, Miss Transome—I am not quite myself at present—I should have thanked you for your most kind and generous offer."

She raised her tear-stained face, and said:

"I want no thanks."

What Gerald saw in her eyes flashed a sudden thought into his mind.

After all, why not?

As her promised husband, he could take the money and save his honour before men. Then, he promised himself, he would slave night and day till he had paid it back and regained his own self-respect. It was only the time he wanted.

And Eva was lost to him in any case!

Should he or should he not?

L. Hughes.

Google

She Had Had Experience of Him.

HE: "My motto is, 'Always think before you speak.'" She: "You must find it very hard to carry on an animated conversation."

A Pressing Invitation.

HE: "You have a very bad cold." She: "Yes; and I'm glad of it." He: "Why, pray?" She: "Because I'm too hoarse to scream if you should attempt to kiss me."

A Momentous Decision.

MAUDIE: "Oh, Gertie, what a lovely engagement-ring! How I envy you!" Gertie: "You needn't, dear. When it comes to the point, I've either got to marry him or give it back."

A Possible Method.

MISS WITHERS: "I presume Mr. Flipp made his usual weekly call on you last night?" Miss Callow: "Yes; and I must say that he made a fool of himself." Miss Withers: "Proposed to you, eh?"

What She Believed.

BOREM (11.57 p.m.): "When I was a child my nurse made me afraid of the dark." Miss Cutting: "Oh, that accounts for it." Borem: "Accounts for what?" Miss Cutting: "You are waiting for daylight so you can go home."

Fanny was Old for Her Years.

UNCLE: "Well, Fanny, aren't you going to kiss your uncle?" Fanny (aged seven): "No, indeed." Uncle: "And why not, little darling?" Fanny: "Because there's your wife looking on, and I don't want to make any trouble in the family."

She Wasn't to be Caught.

MR. LAWHEAD: "Why do you treat me so coldly? Why didn't you answer the note I wrote you last Thursday?" Miss Brushley: "Sir, I don't wish to have anything more to say to you. You began your note by saying you 'thought you would drop me a line.' I want you to understand that I'm not a fish."

Food for Thought.

"YOU say you want to marry my daughter. Have you spoken to her?" "Yes, sir," replied the young man, "and have gained her consent." "Well, if she has said 'Yes,' that settles it. Anything I might say or do wouldn't have the slightest influence." Then the young man went home and wondered if he were not too young to marry such a girl.

Convincing Signs.

CLARA: "I don't know what to make of your brother. For three months after we met, he did nothing but write poetry to me." Dora: "Has he stopped that?" "Yes. Since then he has made me some nice presents, but he has even stopped that." "H'm! Let—me—see. I have it. The household pages of our newspapers have been clipped terribly of late. No doubt he is making a collection of cooking recipes. He's in earnest."

Rather Cutting.

HE: "Won't your *fiancé* be jealous at this interview?" She: "Not when he sees whom I'm with."

Vindictive.

MAY: "She said she would never forgive him." Ethel: "But she afterwards married him." May: "That merely shows that she meant what she said."

He Thought Her Rather Plain.

MRS. PASSAY: "Everybody says my daughter got her beauty from me. What do you say to that?" Mr. Witts: "Well, I think it was very unkind of her to take it from you."

A Lover's Quarrel.

"HALLO, Fitzy! where did you get that black eye?" "Oh, it was only a lover's quarrel!" "Lover's quarrel! Why, your girl didn't give you that, did she?" "No, it was her other lover."

Oh! What a Story!

HER father (coming suddenly into the room): "Eh, what is this?" Her lover: "I was telling Miss Budd a story." Her father: "With your arm round her waist?" Her lover: "Er—yes, sir. It was a love story."

Accounted for the Number.

HE: "Miss Flipp says she had nearly one hundred proposals at the seaside this summer." She: "That is true." He: "She must be very popular." She: "Oh, I don't know. You see, Mr. Softly proposed to her every day for three months."

A Hint that Succeeded.

SHE was inclined to be sentimental. He was nothing if not practical. "Would that you could tell me how to mend a broken heart," she said. "I have known of cases where it has been done by splicing," he replied. That was the remedy tried in this case.

A Successful Appeal.

JUDGE: "Was that young Mr. Smith I saw leaving the house as I entered?" Daughter: "Yes, papa." Judge: "And didn't I prohibit him coming here any more?" Daughter: "Yes, papa, but he appealed to a higher court, and mamma has removed the injunction."

She Knew the Pattern.

LANDLADY: "I'll have to request you to pay in advance, Mr. Shortleigh." Shortleigh: "Why, isn't my trunk good for a week's lodging?" Landlady: "No; it looks like one of those emotional trunks." Shortleigh: "Emotional?" Landlady: "Yes; one that is easily moved."

A Sensible Rejoinder.

"Don't you think," asked the young man with the long nose, "that Miss Quickstep dresses as much like a man as possible in order to get herself talked about?" "On the supposition that she does," replied the other young man, with a frosty glitter in his eye, "I suggest that we defeat her purpose by not talking about her. Understand?"

It Couldn't be True.

"THERE is some money, my love," said the husband, "I don't want any," replied the wife. "Come now, darling, take this £5 note and go out shopping." "Thank you, dearest, but I really don't care to. I would rather stay at home and see to the housework." Then the husband awoke and found, as the reader has already suspected, that he had been dreaming.

A Thrilling Scene.

SHE had marked the huskiness in his voice for the past ten minutes, and the nervous manner in which he fidgeted in his chair spoke volumes to her. She knew what was coming, and hoped it would. "Clara," he said finally, and his throat seemed dry and parched, "would you—that is, could you—do you think that you——" "Go on, George," she murmured encouragingly, "I am listening." "Would you—er—do you think you could—er—get me a drink of water, Clara? I am as dry as a fish."

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THE AMATEUR UMBRELLA MENDER.

The Tale of a Curious Mistake.

Gilbert Reynolds glanced at his reflection in the office mirror and laughed. He was a tall young fellow, with bushy brown hair, a Roman nose, and a very determined-looking mouth and chin. Just now he had buttoned himself up in an old ulster, and pulled a soft felt hat down over his eyes, and with his brother-in-law's umbrella and his sister Amy's parasol under one arm, and his own umbrella under the other, he cut very much the same figure as the man who went the rounds of the City crying "Umbrellas to mend!"

It was just six o'clock and beginning to grow dark, when Gilbert left the office. Some grey clouds were scurrying across the autumn sky, and a few chilly raindrops splashed on the pavement.

Gilbert started briskly in the direction of home, busy with his own thoughts, until his attention was attracted by a sudden tap on one of the windows of an old-fashioned dwelling-house which he passed every day.

Looking up he saw to his astonishment a very pretty girl beckoning to him. Her hair was fair, and curled about her forehead and neck in loose ringlets; and a roguish-looking dimple kept guard at the corner of her smiling mouth.

Now Gilbert was too gallant a young fellow to pass on unheeding, while a pretty girl like that beckoned to him. He paused, smiled, and would have raised his hat had he not been, as I have already told you, burdened with umbrellas.

The young girl threw up the window and called to him in a sweet, clear voice:

"Wait a minute, please! I have an umbrella for you!"

And immediately she vanished.

Gilbert stood for an instant quite dumbfounded, and then, as the ludicrousness of the affair rushed over him, he burst into a little laugh of amusement, calming himself, however, when the front door opened.

She had mistaken him for the umbrella man.

Gilbert was young, and of course admired a pretty girl; so he at once decided to accept the situation, as it promised further opportunity of seeing this charming creature.

So, when she appeared with a black silk umbrella in her hands, he turned to her with grave attention.

"The handle is broken, you see," she said, "and the spring," partially opening the umbrella and shaking out the dark folds with her fair little hands. "I have been watching for you all day," she added naïvely; and Gilbert's heart leapt into his throat.

How nice it must be to have that dear little thing watching for a fellow *every* day!

The young lady turned a little anxious look upon him from a pair of wide, blue eyes.

"Do you suppose it can be mended?" she asked, confidingly.

"Oh, yes, indeed!" was Gilbert's reckless answer, although he knew no more about it than she did.

"And when can I have it?"

"To-morrow," said Gilbert, promptly, congratulating himself on the prospect.

"So soon? Very well."

She nodded her bright little head at him and ran up the steps while Gilbert passed on with an additional umbrella in his hand and visions of golden curls, blue eyes, and rosy lips mingling in delightful confusion in his brain.

That evening he sat down to supper with a dreamy and abstracted air. His sister tried to rally him.

"Gil," she said, "your future wife is in town."

"Eh—what?" said Gilbert.

"The girl whom I have decided upon for my sister-in-law," pursued Amy, laughingly. "She was in the same class as I at school. The family have just moved to town, and next week you must call with me."

"Well, I'll see about it," said Gilbert dreamily, as he put a teaspoonful of salt into his second cup of tea.

Amy looked at him with wide-eyed amazement.

"What has come over the boy?" she ejaculated. "Gil, dear," leaning across the table, "you have not been gambling or robbing the bank, have you?"

Gilbert shook his head as a reply.

The next morning on his way to the City, he rang the bell of the house which contained his unknown beauty.

The young lady opened the door.

"I shall not be able to return your umbrella to-day," he explained, glibly. "It will take longer to repair than I expected. To-morrow, without fail, I will bring it."

(Gilbert had left the umbrella with an old man, whose sole employment consisted in mending chairs, umbrellas, and musical instruments.)

"Oh, very well," said the little lady, as she cast a smiling look at the clear sky, and another at the young man, who, in his neat business suit, presented a different aspect from the rather rough-looking figure of the previous evening. "There is no particular hurry about it, so long as the weather is fine."

And then, as he went striding away, she looked after him.

"What a very respectable-looking person he is for one in his position," she murmured.

The next day Gilbert was prompt with the umbrella, and the young lady as prompt with her purse. She looked her property over with a little nod of satisfaction.

"That looks very well," she said. "And now, how much am I to pay you?"

Gilbert hesitated, faltered, and flushed, and finally stammered, like the man whom Dickens has made famous:

"It's of no consequence."

But the amused surprise in the girl's face brought him to his senses, and he coolly named the price which he had that morning paid to the old man. It is safe to say that the silver coin which passed from the girl's hand into his was put sacredly away; for by this time Gilbert was very far gone. The bright eyes and sweet voice had quite bewitched him.

On the following week Amy insisted upon Gilbert calling with her on the young lady whom she declared he should marry.

"She is the dearest girl in the world," said Amy enthusiastically, "and the very prettiest. You will be sure to like her."

"Oh, yes, I know," drawled Gilbert; "a tall, dashing girl, with flashing black eyes, and an awful temper. Of course, I must go with you, sis; but don't build any matrimonial air-castles, for my heart is no longer in my own keeping."

And he straightened his tie with a sentimental sigh, and took his silk hat in one neatly-gloved hand.

Amy looked at him sharply as they started off together. Was her pet brother really in love with some strange girl?

"What a goose you are, Gil!" she said, half provoked. "Claire doesn't answer to your description at all—wait until you see her."

Great was Gilbert's surprise when his sister led him up the steps of the identical house which contained his unknown divinity; and great was the unknown divinity's surprise when her old friend, Mrs. Ross, introduced as her brother the tall young man who had taken her umbrella to mend!

Gil smiled into the wide blue eyes of Miss Claire Edmonds, and bowed low before her, while she, after one swift, bewildered glance, burst into a merry peal of laughter, in which she was joined by Gilbert.

"Why, it's the umbrella man!" she exclaimed; and Amy looked on in blank amazement, wondering if her brother and her friend had taken leave of their senses.

Explanations followed. Of course my readers may imagine that Gilbert's first call was not his last one, and that Amy's matrimonial air-castles were built of substantial material; for Gilbert Reynolds and the pretty fair-haired girl are happiest when sharing one umbrella, and they are soon to be married.

Stanley Hammond.

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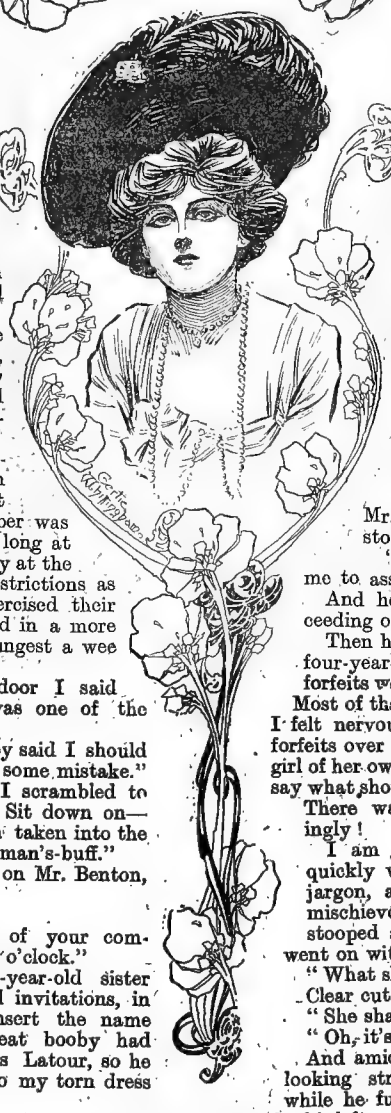
BASHFUL, YET FEARLESS.

How a Shy Man Won a Bride.



If I had been caught in such a situation by anybody but John Benton I should have been terribly annoyed.

There I was sitting on the floor of the nursery, with hair tumbled, my face red, and a great rent across the front of my skirt, where it had been caught by a nail a few minutes before during a fierce blind-man's-buff scrimmage.

My little sister Alice was having a Christmas party, and of course I had to assist in entertaining the guests. There were just twelve, seven boys and five girls. Supper was over—everybody was too excited to sit long at the table—and we all retired to the nursery at the top of the house, where there were no restrictions as to noise, and where the seven boys exercised their shouting franchise to the utmost, assisted in a more subdued way by the five girls, the youngest a wee little girl of four years.

When John Benton tapped at the door I said "Come in" carelessly, supposing it was one of the servants.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Latour. They said I should find you here. But perhaps I have made some mistake."

"Not at all, Mr. Benton," said I, as I scrambled to my feet. "We are pleased to see you. Sit down on—on the piano stool. The chairs have been taken into the other room. We have been playing blind-man's-buff."

"I—I received this invitation," went on Mr. Benton, taking an envelope from his pocket.

The gilt-edged card within read:

"Miss Latour requests the pleasure of your company on Tuesday, December 29th, at five o'clock."

I looked reproachfully at my seven-year-old sister Alice. She had sent one of her printed invitations, in which the printer had neglected to insert the name "Alice," to John Benton, and the great booby had taken it for granted, that I was the Miss Latour, so he had come in full dress—a nice contrast to my torn dress and dishevelled hair.

"Well, I am glad you have come, though I suppose this is not exactly the kind of gathering you expected to find, is it?"

I did not care much what I said to John Benton. Ever since I had met him at the Warrens' ball, three months ago, my brothers all declared that he was in love with me, but was too bashful to tell me so. I met him often, and though I am sure I am not an awe-inspiring personage, I could not help seeing that he was never at ease in my presence.

Not that he was backward where men were concerned. My brother Will took me to the Stock Exchange one morning, and I saw John Benton, with his hat on the back of his head, grasping a brass railing with one hand and shaking the other, holding some papers in the face of a savage-looking man, and shouting at him at the top of his voice in the most defiant manner. Will said the savage-looking man was a bear, and that Mr. Benton was a bull. Then Mr. Benton caught sight of me, and came and stuttered and stayed with me for ten minutes.

But Mr. Benton was not thinking about the market as he walked over to the piano-stool in his dress coat and white necktie, and sat there with one of the most sheepish smiles I ever saw on a young man's face.

"Now, Lou, you must sit down on the floor again so that we can play forfeits. And you, too, Mr. Benton. Come on," said Alice.

John Benton blushed and looked at me.

"We shall have to obey, I am afraid, Mr. Benton. But you can sit on the piano stool if you prefer it," I said.

"Oh, but I don't, Miss Latour! Allow me to assist you to sit down."

And he actually tried to make a courtly proceeding of depositing me on the floor.

Then he sat down himself, with little Stella, the four-year-old mite, between us, and the game of forfeits went on.

Most of the penalties were in the shape of kisses, and I felt nervous until my turn came. Alice held the forfeits over the head of a particular friend of hers, a girl of her own age, and it was the duty of the latter to say what should be done with the owner of the article.

There was my handkerchief held up threateningly!

I am ashamed to say that my heart beat quickly when Alice repeated the familiar nursery jargon, and it fairly jumped when she, with a mischievous glance at Mr. Benton and myself, stooped and whispered to her friend. Then she went on with the question:

"What shall be done with the owner?"

Clear cut and distinct came the answer:

"She shall kiss Mr. Benton."

"Oh, it's Lou—it's Lou!" shouted Alice.

And amid the tempest of laughter, Mr. Benton sat looking straight before him with a crimson face, while he fumbled at his white necktie until the bow was under his left ear.

There was a silence, as everybody except Mr. Benton looked at me to see the operation performed, when a baby voice at my side said:

"I'll tiss him for you, Lou."

So Stella climbed up to Mr. Benton's neck, with one of her hands on his white shirt front, and, as she said herself—

"I tissed him right on the mouf, and it tittled my nose!"

I did not want to play at forfeits any longer—it was too dangerous; so I proposed that we should all sing.

"Ess, I tan sing. I know lots of songs," said Stella.

She did not feel at all abashed over the fact that she had left a dark, sticky impression of her fingers on Mr. Benton's starched shirt front, and as for him he seemed to feel flattered at her evident preference for him.

I sat down at the piano and played accompaniments for school songs, while the children stood around me and bawled the words into my ears with the excruciating, flat intonation peculiar to the untrained voice.

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Mr. Benton was sitting near the window, with little Stella on his knee, apparently enjoying the noise, and with his eyes fixed on me in a blank stare of admiration that I could not help seeing whenever my face was half turned in his direction.

"Now let me sing a song all by myself," said Stella.

Mr. Benton looked inquiringly at me, and I answered:

"Yes, Stella, let us hear you sing one all by yourself."

So she commenced deliberately:

"Little bir-die, on—the—tree! (a long breath) on—the—tree! (another long breath) on—the—tree!"

Then she stopped, and with a haughty disregard of the desires or opinions of her audience that would have been worthy of a petted prima donna, turned carelessly round on Mr. Benton's knee and looked out of the window, while the company awaited her pleasure.

"Oh, loot—loot at the big birdie on the tree out of the window," she said, suddenly pointing downward towards where I knew a tall tree grew close to the house.

Mr. Benton was apparently startled by this evidence of Stella's keen vision, for I saw him jump as his eyes followed the direction of her finger. He controlled himself at once, however, as he replied quickly:

"I think that is the shadow of a cloud in the moonlight, and not a birdie, Stella."

"No, no, I saw a birdie on the tree," she persisted.

He put her down and she ran over to me. As I took her on my lap I heard the door close, and saw that John Benton had disappeared.

"That is rather unceremonious. I wonder whether he is coming back? Well, I don't care whether he is or not," I thought, as I made up my mind that the festivities could proceed without him.

I sat Stella on the end of the piano and played a lively polka for the children, with Stella's assistance, she drumming on two or three of the keys in the bass at intervals, with a very weird, if not harmonious, effect.

"I want some more sugar-candy," announced Stella imperiously.

"I shall have to go downstairs for it, Stella. It is all in the dining-room," I said.

"Well, do down. I'll be dood."

Of course I had to go. I left Stella in Alice's charge, and ran swiftly down the stairs. The nursery was on the third floor. I do not know what induced me to open the door of my parents' bedroom as I passed it. I did so, however. It was quite dark save for one narrow bar of moonlight forcing its way through the branches of the poplar outside the window.

I glanced carelessly into the room, with my hand on the handle of the door, and was about to continue my journey to the dining-room when I felt a current of air from an open window, and saw something white gleaming in the moonlight for an instant, and then disappear.

"What is that? It looked like a hand," I thought, as an indescribable feeling of terror passed over me and left me shivering.

There was not a sound to be heard in the room save the rustling of the curtains as the light wintry breeze blew them from the window, but I was certain someone was there.

What was that?

Surely a man climbing in through the window! Yes, I was not mistaken. My eyes had become accustomed to the darkness by this time, and I could plainly see the outline of his figure defined against the window.

In that terrible instant all I had ever heard or read about burglars and their desperate actions when brought to bay passed through my mind. I remembered half a dozen stories wherein a young girl had successfully outwitted expert midnight thieves, and captured them alone and unaided.

The man, with his round head covered by some kind of closely-fitting cap, was cautiously creeping through the window, and I saw the tree shake, as if just relieved of a burden. He had evidently climbed the tree to reach the room, and I remembered hearing my brother Will say only the day before that it was a favourite plan of thieves in robbing a house to get up to the second storey by means of a porch or tree, while the family were gathered in the lower rooms in the early evening.

I could not move! There was no light in the passage outside the room, and I could not be seen by the intruder, as I stood with my hand on the door-handle, watching him, and listening in a dreamy way to the noise of the children in the nursery overhead.

He was inside the room by this time, and I noticed that his footsteps were noiseless, as if he had no shoes on, as he moved across the bar of moonlight towards the bureau where my mother always keeps her jewellery. I saw a round patch of bright yellow fall on the keyhole of the top drawer, and then heard a metallic rattling. The thief was picking the lock.

If I could only scream or call Will!

The drawer opened; the man was fumbling at its contents, when—crash! The yellow patch of light disappeared and, with a fearful word, I saw the man fall, another man holding him! Then a pistol shot rang through the room, and echoed up and down the stairs, and the room was flooded in light. Somebody had switched on the light.

For a few seconds my eyes were so dazzled that I could not see anything. Then I saw two men rolling on the floor in a desperate struggle, while a pistol lay just out of their reach. The man underneath, with his closely-fitting plush cap, was scowling at me as he tried to release himself, and I thought I could see murder written on his thin lips and short, turned-up nose so plainly that I should have been in favour of hanging him on the spot.

But who was the other man, holding the thief with a grip of iron, as each tugged and writhed in the attempt to subdue the other? Surely that was the bow of a white necktie at the back of his neck! That was a dress coat with the tails spread out like the wings of an eagle, or I was much mistaken!

In the battle, just as Will and my father reached the room and rushed past me, the combatants rolled over, and a very red face, which, however, was anything but sheepish now, was turned toward me. The face of—John Benton!

Will had the thief by the arm in a minute, while John Benton lay panting on the floor. Then it was I saw a great red stain on the white shirt front. It was blood!

Somehow, I forgot all about the thief, Will, my father—everything, as I threw myself down by the side of John Benton and pressed my handkerchief over the red stain.

"John, John! What is it? Where are you hurt? Oh, father, he is killed!" I screamed. "What shall I do?"

I will never believe again that John Benton was ever bashful, for he just put one of his hands on the back of my head, pulled my face down to his, and whispered:

"Do just what you are doing now, and as you have commenced to call me John, do it all the rest of your life, and let me call you Lou."

There was a sudden disturbance! The thief had broken away from Will! The tree shook violently, and Will said, as he put his head out of the window:

"Well, let the rascal go. It will save a good deal of trouble. Ah, there is his pal, who was on guard. They are both running as if the whole detective force were at their heels." Then, turning to John: "How are you hurt, Mr. Benton? You don't look as if it was very serious."

"It is not serious," said John, sitting up. "That fellow cut his hand in some way while opening the bureau, and he rubbed the blood all over my shirt; that's all."

I bit my lip and gave John a look that should have frozen him. It did not have the proper effect, however, for he followed me upstairs to the nursery, where the racket of play had rendered the children oblivious to the disturbance below.

As he took Stella on his knee he said:

"You must sing 'Birdie on a Tree' for us again, will you?"

"Ess, I will sing it for you, but you must tiss Lou for me now. She has diven me lots and lots of tandy."

"Yes, I think so," said John. "And I'll tiss her for you."

And he actually did it. Moreover, he says now that it is his privilege, and I suppose, under the circumstances, he is right.

John Mandeville.

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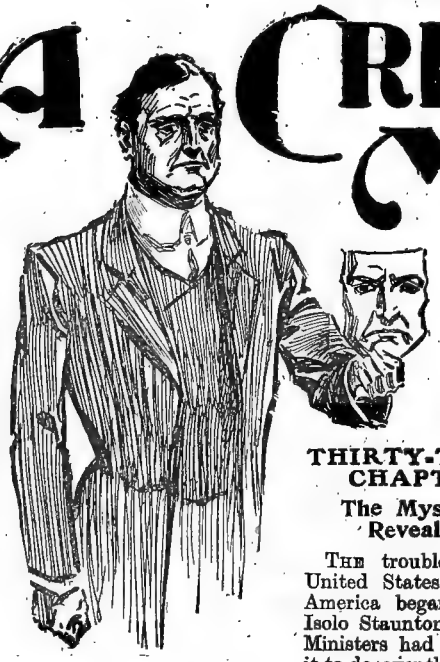
POWERFUL ROMANCE.

A CRIMINAL MILLIONAIRE



By GEORGE GRIFFITH.

Author of "The Angel of the Revolution," "Olga Romanoff," "The Lake of Gold," etc., etc.

THIRTY-THIRD CHAPTER.

The Mystery Revealed.

THE trouble in the United States of South America began just as Isolo Staunton and his Ministers had intended it to do, over the making of the Inter-Oceanic Canal. Columbia had finally rejected the treaty for the concession of ten miles of territory on either side of the Panama Canal, and Panama had also started business as a Sovereign State.

The powerful group of financiers, who had been working to make the Nicaraguan Canal a fact, got to work at once, and had almost engineered the scheme through Congress when the Washington Government was faced with a Note from the Sovereign State of Nicaragua, informing all whom it might concern that the said Sovereign State had merged its identity into that of the United States of South America and that Nicaraguan territory was no longer available for the making of the canal.

"I guessed he'd do that, Mr. President," said Kesteven to his host in the bungalow at Oyster Bay nearly a month after the *Isola* vanished from the Bay of Funchal. "You'll find that Staunton is a hard man to deal with. He's got all the fire of the Spaniard and the grit of the Anglo-Saxon in him, and I can tell you for your own information, and it may be for the safety of the United States up here, that you haven't got to take the United States down there as any sort of a joke. If my late partner means fight, there'll be war such as you have never known!"

"I can't help it," replied the President. "The point is that, if we can't have both of these canals, we've got to have one of them. Don't you see what it means? We'll have the American continents cut in half in two places, and when that's done there's nothing to prevent these United States of South America, as they call themselves, allowing Russia, China, and Japan to send their warships right through from the Pacific to the Atlantic and—well, just knocking the Monroe doctrine kite high, and you know as well as I do that the United States can't stand that. The American people would fight the world first."

"And, my dear Mr. President," replied Kesteven, getting up from his chair, thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets, and walking with long, slow strides, up and down the room, "you'll have to forgive me if I tell you, speaking as a loyal and patriotic citizen of this Republic, that under those circumstances we shall get the most almighty hiding that a country ever asked for."

"That, Mr. Kesteven, is impossible," exclaimed the President, jumping to his feet. "There is no power that could conquer a country of this size, with seventy millions of Americans in it."

"They wouldn't want to, Mr. President," replied Kesteven; "you have just got to look at the map to see that. The other United States have ships enough now to clear the seas of this half of the world, shut up every port we have, and leave a couple of millions of very angry American soldiers marching up and down the country from Maine to Texas, looking for something to shoot at and not finding it. That's the trouble."

"Then I suppose I am to understand," replied the President, facing him, his hands also thrust into his pockets and his legs wide apart, "that from what you know—and you'll excuse me if I say that you seem to know a lot more than you've told me—you think that I should ask this late partner of yours, this President of the other United States, round to afternoon tea, and talk matters over."

"That's it, Mr. President," replied Kesteven. "I have told you everything I can tell you, except just this: You'll have to negotiate about those canals. You can't fight the question. You may take it from me that Isolo Staunton has resources behind him which are quite too big a proposition even for the United States to get a grip of. He has every power on earth behind him except two."

"And those?" asked the President.

"Great Britain and Japan. They were the only two he couldn't buy."

The President lit his cigar, blew a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling, and said:

"Good enough, Mr. Kesteven! I don't want to inquire into the private concerns of yourself and your friend Staunton, but as far as the Nicaragua proposition concerns this country, you can cable to him right away that if the United States of South America makes the Nicaraguan Canal, the United States of North America will make the Panama Canal, whether his new United States likes it or not. That territory is part of this continent, and I reckon that my good friend Diaz of Mexico will also have something to say on that subject. He's not having any back door of that sort left open. What he doesn't know about those greasers down yonder isn't worth forgetting, and I reckon he'll agree with me that if your friend wants war right away, he has only got to ask for it."

"I don't know, Mr. President, that he wants war, as such, any more than you want it. Still, he's about as ready for it as you are, and if he found that you weren't quite as ready—"

Kesteven heard a low buzzing sound under the President's desk.

"You'll excuse me a moment, won't you, Mr. Kesteven? There is something I have to attend to right now in the next room."

"Why, certainly. Please don't let me make any trouble

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about that, Mr. President. In fact, I don't think I have much more to say, anyhow."

When the President left the room Kesteven got up and began to walk up and down, pulling hard at his cigar and digging his heels into the carpet.

"It looks as if he'd got hold of some of it somehow. I wonder how much? I hope Staunton hasn't made that old mistake again, trusting a man too little—and if that man happens to be myself, he's just going the shortest possible way to find trouble. We've been partners long enough now for him not to play the——"

The door opened at this moment, and the President came back with a piece of grey paper in his hand. He closed the door behind him and locked it.

"What do you make of that?" he said.

Kesteven took the piece of paper and looked at it.

"Receiving Station, Cape Breton. October 13th. Message picked up in mid-ocean from Minnesota *en route* to Boston, says: 'Aerogram received from unknown source stating Wilfrid Ellerton, son of Sir Wilfrid Ellerton, well-known manufacturer and millionaire of Ellerton Manor, Yorkshire, assaulted and drugged on yacht *Isola*, belonging to Isolo Staunton, now alleged President of United States of South America. Transferred by unknown means to subterranean regions somewhere near Iceland. Location believed to to be near intersection of twentieth meridian of west longitude with 62½ north latitude in south-western line of Hekla's volcanic activity. Possible connection, Teneriffe. Submarine manufactory, money. Silver especially. Also gold. Large production notes of all countries having coinage on gold basis. Only possible communication, yacht *Isola*. Find if possible and catch. Great revelations may then be expected. WILFRID ELLERTON.'"

"Well, Mr. Kesteven," said the President, when his guest had read the message and was looking at him eye to eye with a note of interrogation in each of his own, "I should like your opinion on that."

"It is just about a month ago, Mr. President," said Kesteven, sitting down again and taking a long pull at his cigar, "that I had a conversation on board the *Isola* with my late friend and partner Staunton, during which conversation I resigned."

"Your late partner, Mr. Kesteven?" echoed the President; "then am I to understand that you had a share in the world-wide fraud which this mysterious message tells us about?"

"That's as it may be, Mr. President," said Kesteven, getting up from his seat and facing squarely. "But, anyhow, I am doing neither the United States nor any other power or community of people any harm just now, and I don't propose to, chiefly because my girl Cora is going to become a Grand Duchess within the next month. That is why I want to give you my word as a man and an American citizen that at present I have no hand in this game. Further, under certain conditions, I am ready to do all I can to convince Staunton that he must let up on this Nicaraguan business. How will that do for the present?"

"We may as well let it go at that, I guess. I think you were wrong, very wrong, but Bryan and the silver people call what you've been doing sound finance. I'm not making any friends with coiners and counterfeiters; but if the son of my old friend Kesteven tells me that he has cut this business and will help in what may be necessary to get this thing straightened out, we'll shake."

Kesteven at once held out his hand and said:

"My word of honour on that, sir. I'll help all I can but you must let me do it in the way that I think best."

"Very well," replied the President. "I shall trust you implicitly, but we haven't got to forget that other vessels, warships of half a dozen nations, maybe, have most likely picked up this message by now."

"That's so, sir," replied Kesteven, "and that, it appears at present, is just where my late partner is going to find trouble."

"Yes," said the President. "If you'll excuse me saying so, there's a heap of difference between a man who creates a new world-power on ordinary political lines and a common swindler who finances the racket on bogus coin and bad notes—a man, in short, who has cheated pretty well all the civilised nations of the world. That man, it seems to me, isn't going to find much recognition, except as an enemy of Society. When this gets known, as it probably is now, the United States of South America won't have a friend on earth."

"That's so, sir. I tried to tell him what kind of fool he was to do that with Ellerton, but he wouldn't have it. Now, I guess, he's going to have it somewhere about where the turkey got the axe."

THIRTY-FOURTH CHAPTER.

On the "Isola" Again.

"WELL, Ramiero, it seems that you were right after all When one begins empire-making, half measures are worse than useless. In this case it looks very much as though they were going to be something like ruinous.

"What luck!" continued Staunton. "Here I am, or at least a few hours ago I was, President of the United States of South America with a million men, the best fighters on earth, behind me, and a hundred and fifty warships ready to go anywhere, do anything if I gave the word. And what am I now? Why, in a few hours I shall be nothing better than a hunted criminal—for that's all the world will think me now. It's hard, Ramiero, most fearfully hard. Twenty-four hours ago I had realised the ideal of my life. I had made a whole continent full of warring little states what might have been the nucleus of one of the most splendid empires on earth, and here, just at the twelfth hour, the whole fabric of my life's work tumbles into ruins——"

"Yes, Señor," replied Don Ramiero, his voice shaking with real sorrow, "it would seem that that is so. And yet, if I may say so, at present this is not quite the question. The real question is, what is to be done? Are you absolutely convinced that you cannot trust these people?"

"Trust them?" cried Staunton with a savage laugh. "About as much as I ought to have trusted Billaud, and that was not at all. As long as I could supply them with unlimited money, they would work for me and never ask where it came from, but now that these infernal messages of Ellerton's have exposed me as a coiner and a counterfeiter from one end of civilisation to the other, all is different!"

"No, my friend, as far as I'm concerned, the game is up. I can't fight the fleets of the world with an unarmed yacht, whatever I could have done with the armies and fleets of the late South American Republic. No, that dream is over, and done with—an empire lost by a single mistake. I have a few millions left, which may not be much good to me now, but I would give all them to go back to that day when you advised me to kill Ellerton—and take your advice."

"Alas, Señor!" said Valdez, shaking his head slowly. "The mill will never grind with the water that is past, and it is

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no use talking about that. What is lost, is lost. The only question now is, how much can be saved? You have still an empire left, unapproachable and impregnable—and you have a vessel which nothing afloat can catch."

Staunton leant back in his chair with his eyes closed, taking long pulls at his cigar, and there was silence for a few minutes, during which he saw the most crucial events of his life pass in swift procession before the windows of his soul.

He saw himself, the convict labourer, working in the Chincha Islands. Then came the whale-boat, and that stroke of the axe which had proved so fateful.

Then the scene shifted from the Pacific to Lady Medcalf-Mears' drawing-room, and from there to the lanes about Cricklewood—then back again to where he was sitting now, and he heard Don Ramiero's voice suggesting that Wilfrid Ellerton should be abolished. If he had only taken that advice! He had taken the wrong turn and he had lost everything. That was all.

The swiftly flitting visions passed. He raised his eyelids and said slowly:

"Yes, I see what you mean, and, after all, the Underworld would be better for us than penal servitude, or a quick transition to another world—which I suppose it would come to in the end. We could also find out how Master Ellerton has managed to make these mysterious signals, and, yes, the possibilities are almost infinite. Yes, friend Ramiero, you are right."

"That, Señor," replied Valdez slowly, "is most true. If, as you say, life in the over-world becomes either impossible or too unpleasant to be supported, why should you not make, as you might do, a paradise of that other world which is wholly yours?"

"Is it?" replied Staunton, lifting his eyelids again. "Do you feel quite sure of that? I don't see myself how there is going to be any certainty on that score until we know how Ellerton has managed to get those messages of his into this world. Can't you see that it must have been either a miracle or a conspiracy, and—well—there you are. If it's a miracle we have another difficulty, and perhaps other dangers to face, but if it is a conspiracy may the Fates do so to me and more also if a man of them escapes the Lake."

"It would be nothing less than their deserts, Señor," replied Valdez, looking at his master's face, and picturing him standing on the ledge above the boiling sulphurous waters, watching each of the culprits brought up, and pronouncing sentence of death.

"Very well, then," said Staunton getting up again, "this time I will take your advice, my friend, and I think the sooner we get out the better. I hope you didn't forget about the coal and the oil fuel."

"No, Señor, the vessel is filled to the decks with them."

"Very well," said Staunton, ringing the telephone bell, "then we may as well start at once."

"Ask Captain Durtal to come aft at once," he said, "as soon as he can."

"He will be with you in a moment, sir," replied Darfield's voice over the wire.

Then a few minutes later there came a rap at the outside door, and Don Ramiero pulled the lever. The Captain came in as the doors opened.

"Captain," said Staunton, "it appears that we have got into a rather bad place, and so I have decided to get out of it as quickly as possible. How are you provided with fuel?"

"I have obeyed your instructions, sir," replied the captain. "The coal bunkers are full to the last pound, and so are the oil tanks."

"Then up-anchor as quietly as you can, put every light out, and get outside as soon as you can. As soon as you get under weigh, see that the guns are in order, and that there's plenty of ammunition at hand. I don't want to have trouble with anyone, but you may as well be prepared. Besides, we shall probably have to pick up some coal on the way home, but just now the principal thing is for you to get out of Rio Bay as quick as your luck will let you."

"But the fleet, sir!" exclaimed the captain, his eyes opening wide with amazement.

"It is quite possible, my dear Durtal," replied Staunton, biting off the end of a cigar, "that if we are not outside within half an hour, not only the fleet, but the forts as well, will open fire, and smash the *Isola* into scrap-iron. I will explain things more fully afterwards, for the present it will be enough if I tell you that Mr. Ellerton has somehow found the means of giving away part of the secret of the Underworld, and that the Bay of Rio, with all these warships and forts about us, is just as unhealthy a place as we can be in."

The Captain's eyes widened again for a moment, then he pulled himself up, saluted, and said:

"It is not for me to ask questions, sir; your orders shall be obeyed. In an hour the *Isola* shall be twenty miles away in the Atlantic."

"Very well," replied Staunton, and the sooner the better."

The *Isola* was lying in the lower part of the harbour of Rio de Janeiro, about half way between Point Calhabouco on the Rio side, and Fort Gravata on the Nitheroy side; in front of her was the fortified island of Villegayon. A couple of miles ahead was the Island of Lage, also fortified, which forms a triangle with Fort San Joao to the west, and Fort Santa Cruz to the east. Four battleships, ten cruisers, and fifteen destroyers were ranged in three long lines on the Rio side, with the exception of a couple of destroyers, which were prowling to and fro across the bay, and down towards the forts to the southward. Altogether, granting that Staunton's suspicions were correct, and that the news from the Underworld had changed his late friends and subjects into enemies, it was a particularly tight place to get out of.

"Well, friend Ramiero, I suppose we may as well go and see the fun, if there's going to be any," he said, throwing the doors open. "The probability is that some of them will begin to shoot when the lights go out, so I think I'd better go and take command."

"As for me, Señor," said Valdez, following him, "where you go I go, and if it is a case of sinking, my place should be by your side."

"And so it shall be, my father's friend—and mine," replied Staunton, laying his hand on his shoulder, with a rare gesture of emotion. "Come up on to the bridge with me—and—yes, why should not our guests come and see the fun as well? Our good friend Smith-de-Ronski might bring his fiddle up and play us an accompaniment to the music of the guns. Suppose you were to go below and present the invitation with my compliments."

"Ah, Señor," murmured Valdez, laying his hand on Staunton's arm with an inimitably Spanish gesture, "that is how I love to see you best. Even as your father was always greatest in the

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darkest hour and the deadliest danger. But, if I may advise, do not entertain our guests until we are safe outside. The men would do anything to have us caught, and the women, as we know, have nerves of steel, and, remember, that a single shout, even the striking of a match, might ruin everything. No, no, let them stop in their cabins until we are once more free on the Atlantic. Think only what a single shell might do."

"It might not be a very bad way out of the trouble after all," laughed Staunton as they went forward; "but, still, I think you are right, and I'm not going to risk ignoring your advice again."

When they reached the bridge they found Captain Durtal in charge, with Darfield forward in the bows, and the second officer aft. It was now almost midnight. The sky was covered with a dense curtain of clouds which had been gathering during the afternoon and evening, and already a few drops of rain were splashing heavily on the decks.

"Excellent! Could not have been better! The best thing that could happen to us would be a regular deluge. I don't care so much for their guns as long as they can't use their searchlights. Are you ready to let go?"

"Everything is ready, sir," replied the captain. "The men are at the guns in case it is necessary to shoot back, we have a full head of steam on, and I can give you thirty knots within ten minutes, and thirty-five within fifteen."

"Very good," said Staunton, going to the engine telegraph and taking hold of the handle. "Slip your cables, and then out lights. Ah, here comes the rain; now catch us who can!"

As he spoke the bottom seemed to fall out of the firmament. A blast of wind burst out of the north-east and came howling across the bay, driving the rain in hissing sheets before them. Instantly the lights of the city, and the electric sparks which showed where the warships lay, were blotted out, and at the same moment those of the *Isola* disappeared, and the cable was slipped.

"Come and take the wheel, Durtal," commanded Staunton shortly; "keep her due south, if we don't get out in this squall we never will, but as long as they can't see us they daren't shoot for fear of hitting each other or the town."

Captain Durtal touched his dripping cap and went into the wheel-house. Staunton swung the telegraph-handle over at full speed. The bell tinkled its answer, a broad sheet of foam sprang out from under the *Isola's* stern, only to be beaten down the next instant by the wind-driven floods of rain. The beautiful fabric of the yacht shuddered for a moment, and then, as the thrill of the engine woke her into life, she leapt away into the darkness and the storm, heading due south for the entrance to the bay.

The rapidly blurring lines of light on either hand and behind were suddenly drowned in a flood of white, misty light, which seemed to take the form of luminous clouds flung up from the sea into the sky. In an instant they were all round the *Isola*, and she was flying through them, a white, swiftly-gliding, ghostly shape, her propellers flinging the water far astern until she was flying at nearly forty miles an hour through the screaming, pelting storm.

"I thought so," laughed Staunton to Valdez, who was clinging, drenched and shivering, to the bridge rail. "Just in time. My luck again, Ramiero, if we had waited till to-morrow morning we'd have had them all round us, and it would have been a case of sinking or surrender, and that, of course would be quite impossible, considering that we have got nearly all the witnesses for the prosecution on board with us. No, it's neck or nothing now; in the morning it would have been nothing. We have the advantage of the alternative now."

Bang—bang—bang—thrurraddud—dudd—dud—deraud, dud-a-duud.

"Yes, I thought so," he shouted through the storm into Ramiero's ear, "there's proof positive that we were right in getting out, I wonder what they think they are shooting at?"

The crash of the big guns, and the thudding roar of the smaller artillery, were already mingling with the howling of the storm as Staunton said this. He had again pulled up the handle of the telegraph, and rammed it down to full speed, and a quarter-master had been sent below to order the engine-room staff to do their best if they wanted to get out of a very tight place. The fire grates were kept heaped with coals, and from the tops of the furnaces the spray pipes poured an incessant shower of vapourised oil. The boilers throbbed and panted as though they were living organisms, working to the extremity of their power. The steam roared through the turbines, and the three propellers whirled faster and faster until the dim white shape was tearing through the waters at more than forty miles an hour, the crash of the guns and the screaming of the shells growing ever fainter and fainter astern."

"Ah, look, look, Señor!" yelled Valdez, pointing ahead. "There is a destroyer crossing our bows!"

Staunton looked up, and saw a dimly outlined black shape, with four flaming funnels, shooting out from Fort San Joao.

"Well, if he wants it, I suppose he'll have to have it," he shouted shrilly, for the ecstasy of battle had got hold of him now.

He took a whistle out of his pocket, flung open the door of the wheel-house, and shouted:

"Three degrees starboard, run her down."

He ran back to the rail, bending down, fighting against the hurricane that was sweeping across the bridge, pulled his revolver out of his hip pocket, and fired three shots in the air. They cracked out distinctly through the dull roar of the storm, and the next instant the two twelve-pounder quick firing guns, which had been mounted on either side of the *Isola's* forecastle, and a couple of Maxims on either side of the short bowsprit, began to roar, and rattle, and thump, pouring their seven hundred shots a minute at the black shape looming up ahead.

One or two white flashes gleamed out from her decks, contrasting strangely with the red glare of her funnels. Two silvery shapes leapt from her deck, plunged into the water, and just as Captain Durtal screwed his wheel over and the *Isola's* head came round, the two torpedoes passed harmlessly to right and left. The next moment the over-arching prow of the thousand-ton yacht hit the destroyer amidships. There was a slight check lasting only for an instant, and the *Isola*, travelling now at nearly forty-five miles an hour, passed over the divided hull of the destroyer amidst clouds of steam from her broken boilers, grated over the fragments of the wreck, and vanished into the storm and darkness to the southward.

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THIRTY-FIFTH CHAPTER.
Another Consignment for the Underworld.

The next day all the world knew that the *Isola*, thanks to the foresight, the almost miraculous intuition of her owner, and a marvellously fortunate combination of atmospheric conditions, had escaped from the Bay of Rio de Janeiro shortly after midnight; in other words, on the morning of the day on which he and his fellow-criminals manning the yacht were to have been captured and handed over to the tender mercies of that society which for the last ten years they had fleeced with such consummate skill, that they had only just come to be suspected.

Everything had been arranged to perfection, at least so those who made the arrangements thought.

The President of the United States of North America had been proved to be perfectly right when he said to Kesteven that, although the Great Powers might recognise the maker of a New World Power created by legitimate means, they would not have anything to do with the man who had made the necessary millions by utterly illegal means. And so the President of the United States of South America had become an outlaw.

The question which the civilised world began to ask itself as soon as the cables had conveyed the news of the escape from Rio to the capitals of Europe and America, was: "What is he going to do with the yacht?"

It was generally admitted by this time that she possessed powers of speed and apparently of coal endurance which put her capture, even by the fastest warships, out of the question. She might keep the fleets of the world on a chase for years, and then not get caught, and yet until she was caught there was no chance of solving the mystery of that Underworld, from which Wilfrid Ellerton's messages had been received by nearly every ship in the northern hemisphere which was fitted with the Marconi apparatus. If he could only have given the exact latitude and longitude, the matter would have been simplified to a certain extent, but even then the problem of communication would remain unsolved until the *Isola* was caught. She was the only possible link between the two worlds, and it was, therefore, obviously necessary to catch her, which was about as difficult a task as the united navies of the world could have set themselves to do.

At six o'clock on the morning after her escape the *Isola* was steaming north-eastward from Rio about five hundred miles from the coast. It was a lovely morning, and as Staunton came up on deck he felt in quite a good humour with himself and the world, in spite of the fact that forty-eight hours ago he had had an empire, and that now he was an outlaw. His guests, who had not been allowed to appear on deck since the arrival at Rio, had now been given the freedom of the ship, and Dennison and Mr. Smith, who had now dispensed with his disguise, lost no time in availing themselves of it. In fact, Staunton had not been many minutes on deck before they came towards him on the promenade deck.

"Good-morning," said Dennison, flicking the ash of his cigarette overboard. "I am so sorry you didn't let us see the fun last night. We heard the guns going, and there was something in the way of a collision, wasn't there? We felt down in our cabins a nasty shock."

"Yes, Mr. Dennison, I suppose you did, and I must apologise for not being able to give you what I have no doubt would have been a very pleasurable experience. M. de Ronski might also have enjoyed it."

"I think we may as well drop that *alias* now, Mr. Isolo Staunton, otherwise Zuarez, since it appears that we have found each other out," replied Mr. Smith, "but I don't think that even you ought to forget that I've got a wife and daughter on board this precious craft of yours. Don't you think that even you are playing the game pretty low down?"

Staunton leant back against the rail and laughed.

"And what should I say in answer to that to a detective who accepted my hospitality and brought the said wife and daughter on board my ship to take part in a concert with the purpose of trapping me—me. Really, Mr. Smith, and

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Hidden Treasure.

For a thing to be very difficult to obtain is to many people a great incentive to go in pursuit of it. Some clever brains have worn themselves out, and capitalists have been known to waste their fortunes, in the vain endeavour to discover perpetual motion. There are men in the world who will dig industriously for long periods in hope to unearth buried treasure, of the whereabouts of which there exists no certain knowledge, who cannot be induced to move one clod of earth for purposes of agriculture. It is a strange fallacy, this preference for what is speculative. Minds so constituted are generally neglectful of what they have while seeking for what they have not, like the Cornish peasant, who searched the road near Launceston all night in a drenching rain for a purse that had been lost. The peasant found the purse, was rewarded with £5, and caught such a chill that he died three weeks later.

Of all treasures, whether hidden or apparent, health is out of all proportion greatest. He who has it not wants everything. Its happy possessor is more than anyone a person to be envied. By preventing or curing indigestion (the first sign of many physical wrecks), Mother Seigel's Syrup has more than anything conferred the blessing of health upon the people of England. "Five years ago, when I was living at Grimsby," writes Mrs. Epton, of Bridge Street, Burgh-in-Marsh, Lincs., on August 18th, 1903, "I had the misfortune to take a chill. That was the beginning of my troubles. My appetite fell away until I could hardly look at food, and I used to eat barely sufficient to keep me alive. I had always a pain at the stomach, and sometimes between the shoulders, which food seemed to make worse. This, and a violent cough, prevented me sleeping at night, so that I became extremely weak. My doctor could do nothing for me but advise rest.

"Such was my condition for two months, when my husband, observing that I made no progress towards recovery, advised me to obtain a bottle of Mother Seigel's Curative Syrup. He had recently read of some remarkable cures effected by that medicine. Though I had tried many patent medicines without avail, I agreed to buy a bottle, and my health began to improve from the first dose I took. I could now sleep soundly and awake refreshed. Five bottles were sufficient to complete my cure. My lost weight returned, and my health has since been excellent. My husband believes that it saved my life."

Mr. Epton was right. Instead of recommending to his wife new and doubtful preparations, he wisely advised resort to what has long been an acknowledged household treasure.

A Case for a Higher Court.

In Paris in 1764 occurred one of those dramatic tragedies such as only take place in France. A young and beautiful lady publicly accused an officer of doing her a grievous wrong; but the court dismissed the case. A few minutes afterwards the lady, remarking that the case should now be tried by a higher tribunal, shot first the officer and then herself. The remedy is indeed a desperate one where they who apply it must needs succumb. Yet that is what often takes place as a result of using improper medicines. "About five years ago I began to suffer from Indigestion and Biliousness, and for eighteen months my life was a misery. My illness began with flatulence and pains in the stomach. I was hardly free from drowsiness and a sick, bilious feeling, and suffered acutely from headaches and dizziness. Nothing I tried did me any real good, until I commenced taking Mother Seigel's Syrup. Then I began to mend. The medicine seemed to put new life into me, and in an astonishingly short time I was quite restored to health. Nurse Douglass, 3 Cromwell Road, Redhill, Surrey."

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you too, Mr. Dennison, surely if you did know as much as you thought you did about your host, you would hardly have walked open-eyed into such a simple little trap as that. To put it quite plainly, you two gentlemen and possibly Madame de Ronski and Mademoiselle Paula, with the assistance of your friend Monsieur Trapané, and my late assistant, Doctor Billaud, thought that you had caught me in the Bay of Nice. You did not. We have since been in the Bay of Funchal, and we have lately left the Bay of Rio de Janeiro, and, you see, I am not caught yet."

"And *we* are," replied Mr. Smith, with a coolness of manner which Staunton did not quite understand.

Dennison strolled over to the other side of the deck and threw the end of his cigarette overboard. When he came back he said, with a nonchalance which Staunton liked even less than the *sangfroid* of Mr. Smith:

"Would it be trespassing too far on your hospitality, Mr. Staunton, if I were to ask you whether it isn't about first drink time? I should like a cocktail, and I shouldn't wonder if my colleague could also do with one. We seem travelling pretty fast, and the breeze, which this wonderful craft of yours makes, is just a trifle chilly."

"Ah," exclaimed Staunton, with a genuine admiration, "what I could have done if I had only had a couple of iron-nerved men like you to help me, but, of course, that is impossible now. Come to the smoking-room and we'll have our cocktails."

If a stranger had been present that morning at breakfast in the saloon of the *Isola*, he or she would not have had the slightest notion of the tragedies which were working underneath the surface of the pleasant, easy manners of host and guests. It would have been impossible to guess that the host was the jailor and that the guests were prisoners, over whom he held absolute power of life and death.

For all that such a stranger would have seen, the flight of the *Isola* from Rio to the Underworld was nothing more than a yachting trip under the most pleasant conditions. Everybody on board appeared to be the best of friends with everyone else, so much so indeed that one night, after a most charming dinner, Staunton had been intoxicated by his prisoners with the magic of sweet sounds. Don Ramiero said to him over their last cigar in the Council Chamber:

"Does it not seem to you, Señor, that these guests of yours take their present circumstances a little too easily?"

"By which you mean, my friend—"

"That there may be something," replied Don Ramiero, very slowly between the puffs of his cigar, "that neither you nor I may know anything about. On the other hand, of course, I am obliged to admit that they may be people of such perfect sense that they're able to accept the circumstances of their present condition as though they were quite normal. That, of course, is only a suggestion, Señor."

"And not at all a bad suggestion either," replied Staunton. "They may be resigned to their fates and awaiting developments, or they may be gambling on the impossible, but as long as the one essential is impossible for them—as long as they can't get weapons, what does it matter what they are thinking about? I could strangle both the men at once, and, as for the women, of course they wouldn't count in any trouble of that sort. And once we have the lot down in the Underworld—well, those who live will see.

It so happened that while this conversation was taking place in the Council Chamber, and while Captain Durtal was on the bridge, Darfield went into Dennison's state-room, and, after closing the door carefully, put a brown leather hand-bag on the sofa, and said:

"Well, sir, there's my part of the contract. Five Mauser pistols, and two-hundred rounds of ammunition; you understand that I'm doing this for my wife's sake, not my own."

"I quite see what you mean," replied Dennison, taking an envelope out of the inside pocket of his dress-jacket. "It is very curious how this affair has got mixed up. This man Staunton, a sort of world-wide swindler, and until just now our jailor, holding our lives in his hands. On the other side, Mercedes in love, and as it would seem, desperately so, with the man whom he meant to either murder or abolish. Your wife chosen among all the nurses of Edinburgh to nurse her through the illness which was caused by the disappearance. She becomes devoted to her patient, and therefore our friend Staunton has got to disappear in such fashion that the world will never know what has become of him. That, I take it, about the situation."

"It is," replied Darfield, almost in a whisper, "it is, I have promised Janet, and, as you know, I could not break my word to her. From now until the end, whatever it may be, I am under the orders of yourself and Mr. Smith."

"Very well, then," said Dennison, giving him the envelope. "You can leave the rest to us. If we put this little adventure through successfully, we guarantee that you shall be a free man, as soon as you land on civilised soil. We are not going to distrust the man who is the husband of such a woman as your wife, whatever blunder he may have made a few years ago. You know just as well as I do that we are just now in a mess that none of us may get out of alive, and so it's just a case of trusting life for life."

"And I, sir," replied Darfield, taking a little glass tube full of white pellets out of his waistcoat pocket, "am the last man on board this ship to mistake your meaning. If you see any sign of me turning traitor, shoot me, and if our adventure, as you call it, does not come off all right, and I have no chance of going back to the old life with Janet, I have got these, and I shall use them."

"That's quite enough, Mr. Darfield," said Dennison, holding out his hand. "I entirely believe you, and so does Mr. Smith. You stand by us, and if we worry through this business alive, you shall find yourself as good a man as ever you were. Perhaps a better one."

"I hope so, sir," said the other one humbly, as he gripped his hand, "if not, I should have no hope of being worthy to be her husband again."

"Keep that thought in your mind," said Dennison, returning his grip, "and we shall get through all right. But, anyhow, living or dead, you will be found worthy of her, when the general balance-sheet is struck, and we all get what we have earned."

"Those are the best words I've heard since Janet spoke to me last. Good night, sir. It wouldn't do for me to be in your room too long," replied Darfield, opening the door, and closing it behind him, without a sound.

(The conclusion of this splendid serial will appear next week.)

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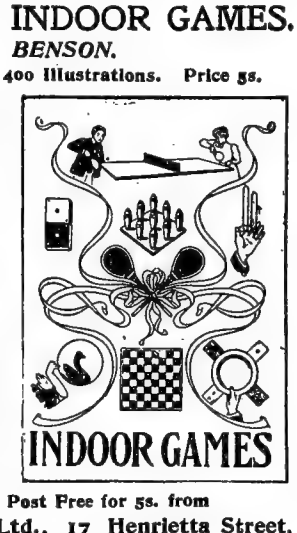

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

Kissing Cousins.

"WHAT is the law about kissing cousins?" asks "ARTHUR," who has several very charming girl relations, whom he often visits.

* * * * *

There is no law about it, "ARTHUR." It depends so much on the cousins. If you have known each other since childhood, the kiss seems a harmless enough thing. If you have only got intimate with them of late years, then kissing should go by instinct. You are not in duty bound to kiss a girl-cousin, neither are you prevented from doing so. It entirely depends on how much you know each other, and if the desire to kiss is mutual and harmless.

Cure for Shyness.

"WHAT is the best cure for shyness in a girl?" asks "MABEL," who is very awkward in the presence of the opposite sex, so doesn't make very much progress in securing a lover.

* * * * *

You'll grow out of it, "MABEL." You would be surprised how a few years change shy girls. Some of the boldest young ladies of twenty-two were very shy at sixteen or seventeen. A very good cure for serious shyness is to keep the mind well occupied at all times, and to read a good deal. If you meet a man, and find it awkward to keep a conversation going, it is always a good idea to know something about books, or other subjects, so that you are not at a loss for a topic.

Returning a Ring.

"FIVE and a half years ago," writes "BEREAVED," "I was engaged to a girl, to whom I gave, of course, a ring, and some other small presents, including—a locket. Six months after our engagement she died, and as her 'intended' I expected something to be sent me as a memento. This I never got, though I remained on the best terms with her parents. They have now gone to another town, since when I have not seen them. I would like your advice as to whether the ring and locket ought not to be returned to me. There are still two or three sisters in the family, and I believe they are using the articles themselves."

* * * * *

I certainly think the parents ought to have sent you a memento. As to returning the ring, I suppose that is for them to decide. It would seem a very natural thing to do, but perhaps the sisters you speak of may only have kept it themselves because they valued it as a token. If that is so, you can scarcely formally demand its return. If you can see them, you might gently hint that you expected to have the ring back, but it is a thing that requires delicate handling.

The Girl Slanderer.

"WHAT am I to do in the following case?" asks "C. V." "I met a girl some years ago, who always seemed very friendly to me. I did not admire her in any serious way, it is true, but always made myself agreeable. Some time ago, I heard from a friend that she had been making the most slanderous statements about me, without cause. Yet when I met her afterwards she seemed as amiable as ever. How should one treat a girl like that?"

* * * * *

Of course you do not know definitely what statements she made about you. Perhaps somebody misunderstood her, or she merely said something in a frivolous way, without intending to do you injury. Your best course would be to continue being as amiable as possible. If she dislikes you, or wishes to do you an injury, you can only cure the feeling by showing her that she has misjudged you.

From the Far West.

I AM always glad to hear from Colonial correspondents. "PRAIRIE FLOWER" writes me from Winnipeg, Canada: "Is it unusual for a young woman to marry a man three years younger than herself? A young man I am very fond of wants me to become his wife, but I am twenty-seven, and he is only twenty-four. Would it be right to marry one so much younger?" The second question is: "How can I get rid of superfluous hair on my face without hurting my complexion?"

* * * * *

In answer to your first question, I do not think the difference in your ages need affect your marriage. Three years is not a great deal under the circumstances, and I advise you to marry the man you love. As to your other question, "Isobel," of *Pearson's Weekly*, tells me that she thinks the only permanent cure for superfluous hair is the operation of electrolysis, which I imagine would not be very possible in so far away a place as yours. I am, however, sending you by post the name of a treatment which is recommended, and can be prescribed for those at a distance. These questions, of course, do not come into my sphere, but in the case of so far away a reader, I am pleased to make a departure.

An Extravagant Youth.

"REFORMER" writes, "I am twenty-two, of good parentage, and in a good profession. But, unfortunately, I am rather extravagant and too fond of pleasure and do not value money as I should. I feel that if I made the acquaintance of a young lady of similar age, of an affectionate and thoughtful disposition, it would be a turning-point in my life, and that I should not feel the desire for pleasure and extravagance. Would you advise me to advertise for such a girl?"

* * * * *

When a man's tastes are extravagant, love affairs are not usually very economical. It simply means that you will have more cause for extravagance. If you met a girl of the very economical type you might be cured; but, somehow, I don't think that kind of girl *does* often reform an extravagant man. In any case, nobody can do himself harm by meeting the right sort of girl. I don't recommend your advertising, as I always think a young man ought to be able to meet a girl socially. The girl who answers matrimonial advertisements may not be quite all that is to be desired. I advise you to wait until you get to know some nice girl in the ordinary way. As to your extravagance, I think I should try a little strength of mind and common sense, and not look to a girl to keep you from the habit.

Cynthia

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Space will not permit of giving all the details of Mrs. Howells' illness and cure, how she came home to England still suffering and growing worse from day to day, went first into St. Mary's Hospital, then Marylebone Infirmary, and later to Paddington Infirmary, without any beneficial results. Her closing words are, however, worth recording.

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